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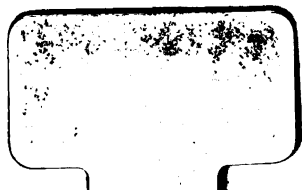
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LOYELLA.

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BY

MRS. HARRY BENNETT-EDWARDS,

AUTHOR OF "A TANTALUS CUP," &c.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

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LOYELLA.

CHAPTER I.

“EVERYBODY” said she was eccentric! showy! fast! Unfortunately for “everybody,” she happened to be young, and very beautiful; rich, and altogether independent of public opinion. —“Everybody” condemned her.

By “everybody” let us understand the immaculate population (female) of Ray-Hilton. Men defended her, “and that without knowing anything whatever about her,” as their wives very aptly remarked. And the women were right, as usual.

No one could learn anything substantial respecting the past or future of the owner of Hilton Abbey; therefore it was

not for a moment to be expected that "anyone" should call upon the new comer. Nevertheless, ours being a free country, everybody is at liberty to criticise his neighbour—Ray-Hilton used its privilege unhesitatingly. "Oh! yes, a young man's beauty—all for effect you know—got up—looks like an actress out of place. Good features? Decidedly, but too much colour about her generally. Besides, who is she? Find this out, and we will call upon her; not before. Why! she may be quite a nobody. Some city tradesman's daughter—who knows?"

By which, and the like characteristic remarks, it will be seen that the inhabitants of Ray-Hilton were a proud race—county families who religiously wiped the dust of city contamination from off their double-soled boots, which, although warranted to stand the mud of Ray-Hilton prejudices, had never been manufactured to resist the tarnish of alien dusts and splashes and specks which now and again fell upon the parent soil.

Mrs. Owen Grant was certainly a stranger and a pilgrim in the land; but not a poor creature asking meekly for a crust at the rich man's threshold. Had she so humbled herself, it is possible that Ray-Hilton, being a Christian community, might have opened a back door and let her into some clean and respectable outhouse, wherein those who were so minded could visit her occasionally, as they visited their village poor; out of charity and long-suffering kindness. No! Mrs. Grant had the sins of

riches and independence covering her like a garment, of which the form and making was objectionable to Bay-Hilton county society. It was not of the fashion they wore, nor of their mild and sober colouring; therefore it was wrong—wrong altogether, without a redeeming point, and accordingly sentenced to *transportation for life* by the whole *posse comitatûs* of Bay-Hilton, whose motto was not, and never would be, *Quot homines, tot sententiæ*. There was but one senate and one code of laws; one opinion and one mode of expression for the well-being of the universe. And the place and the people which issued this mighty charter were—Bay-Hilton.

It was not even known to that august court whether the prisoner at bar were married, or single, or neither. The tradespeople addressed her as Mrs. Owen Grant, and she had a child living in the house; but husband there was none to be seen or heard of. Of course she *might* be a widow—a dangerous young widow, set down as a snare for the sons of the county. Oh yes! they were willing to grant her so much grace. “Only it *was* strange that not even her own servants had ever reported having heard her make mention of any husband, alive or dead; but still ——” Well, they were above vulgar suspicions, these Bay-Hilton mothers and daughters; so they kindly granted to the stranger the title of widow, for lack of a better by which to know her.

At any rate, she had committed one unpardonable act—unpardonable at least in a nobody. She had bought Hilton Abbey, the show place of the neighbourhood, over the head of Lady Maude Legrande, who for some years had been trying to constitute herself one of Ray-Hilton society!!! Her ladyship had only waited for the selling of Hilton Abbey to plant herself for ever in the congenial soil; to grow and flourish there, and to put forth good fruit—meet nourishment for the delicate stomachs of the old families. Of course they despised a title, these families; but they liked the woman, do you see? Lady Maude was simply “delightful;” but Mrs. Owen Grant!—well, no one knew anything about her ancestors; her father might have sold dry goods in the neighbourhood of St. Paul’s.

Hilton Abbey was such a lovely place to be wasted! Not large, but a perfect gem, crowded from cellar to garret with historical associations. “Why, it was here that Henry VIII. brought poor Anne Boleyn to enjoy her society undisturbed while she was yet maid of honour to the Queen!!” So spoke the aged grandames round their cottage fires.—At any rate, the initials “A. B.” were graven on several panels in the house and on various trees in the garden. They cannot contradict the scandal, why, then, should we doubt its veracity? Besides, there was a drawing—said to be a house—which poor Anne, in some fit of abstraction, had scratched or cut upon one of the oak

panels of her sleeping room. It was considered a work of art in Ray-Hilton, and, of course, added considerably to the glory of the Queen. Unfortunately, time and ill-usage had so blurred and distorted the lines, that some former owner, anxious to further the historical glory of Hilton Abbey, had thought it necessary to engrave underneath the drawing, "This exquisite work of art is intended to represent the farm-house in which Anne Boleyn was born; it was carved by her own hand when she was living at Hilton Abbey under the protection of the King, in the year 1530."

Now, this Mrs. Owen Grant, with unpardonable ignorance, had hung a curtain over the instructive relic! She, in her modern scepticism, did not look upon it as an authentic fact either that Anne Boleyn had been born in a farm-house at all, or that she had ever visited Ray-Hilton.

Nevertheless, Mrs. Grant loved Hilton Abbey on its own merits; she delighted in the grand old trees in front of it and the sweep of hills behind. She liked to wander up and down the avenue of elms which led to the house; and round about the lake which lay hidden in the valley. Nature had been bountiful with the gifts she spread around Hilton Abbey—it was perfect outside, as in. The house was of grey stone, gothic windowed, with an ivy grown tower; but all on a small scale, so that there was no air of ghostliness or chill discomfort about it.

Inside, Constance Grant had furnished it with the correctness of an artist's eye and the skill of a woman's touch. At Hilton Abbey all things were harmonious in tone and colour, congruous in shape and kind. A master's hand had fashioned each separate object, and a perfection of taste, rarely met with in English women, had placed everything in the spot for which it would seem to have been created. It is doubtful whether in all England could be found a more valuable private collection of works of art, than lay around and about the dwelling place of this "eccentric person." But it was not on quantity she prided herself; rather on quality of the rarest degree—on intrinsic excellence, and not mere approved value. Pictures were her especial fancy, and amongst these she loved best, two which Ary Scheffer had painted and given as a bond of friendship to one who had been to her as a father—two of Scheffer's purest and holiest conceptions, gems even amongst the host of soul-breathings which he embodied for the honour of his country.

Constance Grant was an Englishwoman by birth; but Rome had reared her, Florence had moulded her, and the arms of the painters had supported her first outward steps. It was they who had led her forth into the fabled streets, among the ghost-haunted garrets, and through the art-endowed palaces of the southern cities. It was the voices of the painters which said to her, "Behold our life, our soul, our God!" To them

Constance had bowed her head, innocent with the trusting innocence of childhood ; and so the spirit of art had early fallen upon her, touching every fibre of her being and raising her soul upwards towards its own immortality.

To-day there stood by her side a child who, walking in her paths, picked up the flowers which she strewed about for its pleasure and her own satisfaction. Violet was a golden-haired, blue-eyed child, who might have been a type for one of Correggio's angels, so pure she seemed and beautiful to look upon. There was something spiritual about her, and yet—she was only little Violet, who walked, and talked, and lived as other children live, neither worse nor better than they ; except for the great love she bore a woman whom all Ray-Hilton despised. Violet had never asked whether Mrs. Grant's ancestors came in with the Conqueror, or where the missing husband lay, living or dead. Poor little child ! she was innocent yet, and sadly lacking the good moral training which so many of the Ray-Hilton mothers wished it lay in their power to give her. "Such a sweet face !" they said, in their generous desire not to visit the sins of the parent upon the child ; "just like a little angel ; poor dear thing ! so sad." But what was "so sad" or wherein Violet was "poor" society wisely did not specify. It only performed a moral duty in pitying the outcast child who may have had manufactory dust sprinkled on its brow, the scars

of factory wheels across its mother's hands, or, worse still, the black stain of account books over its father's name. Nevertheless, as these new comers were undeniably *men and brothers*, "people" were in Christian charity bound to *pity* them for all shortcomings in the matter of birth and family. And this they did most liberally. For the rest—God help them should they ever stand up for judgment before Ray-Hilton!

But after Mrs. Grant had inhabited Hilton Abbey for more than six months without a single neighbour having called upon her, chance brought about a change in her intended destiny; a change which made itself felt far beyond the precincts of Constance Grant's house.

It happened in this wise——





CHAPTER II.

CASTLEROCK was the seat of Sir Hugh Challice, Baronet. It had belonged to the family from time immemorial. His wife, Lady Challice, was, and always had been, celebrated for her peculiarities, especially for the peculiar manner in which she brought up her family, or rather allowed them to bring themselves up. Each member walked in his or her particular way, and acted according to individual ideas of right and wrong. Individuality was the mania of everyone at Castlerock, from the scullery-maid, and the stable boy, to Sir Hugh himself. Free thought, free speech, free action, ran riot amongst them. "They are quite American," people said, by way of excusing them, and not because any connection with that independent country had ever been traced to their doors. But eccentricity in them mattered very little. They were sons of the Castlerock estate; born upon it, nurtured by it, holders of its thousand acres, tillers of its soil; and last, but by no

means least, in the eyes of a sporting population, strict preservers of its game laws. For centuries their ancestors had held it, and their children would keep it in all days to come ; unless, indeed, times should grow quite degenerate and the country be utterly revolutionised. Then, and then only, would the Challices of Castlerock cease to be. But that was not yet, and they *are*.

Mrs. Owen Grant was eccentric, and they accounted it a sin in her ; Lady Chalice was eccentric, and it became a virtue. "So original ! so unlike other people ! so clever !" — But you see she was one of themselves, and the other an alien. — Constance Grant might be "one of those objectionable *nouveaux riches*," or a retired actress, or any other "undesirable" person ; while Lady Chalice — Well, let us be just, the *title* was not her password — She was a daughter of the soil, the mother of the future baronet, wife of their county representative — and mistress of Castlerock. These were her virtues, and be sure she needed no others to condone any reasonable number of faults in the eyes of her neighbours. Of course women cavilled at her morals (behind her back), abused her manner of life, and held themselves vastly her superior, each to her own thinking. In short, they tolerated Lady Chalice, for her good name's sake, and generously pardoned her eccentricities. Nevertheless, it was strange that where she led they followed. Not too quickly indeed ; not so that anyone could say, "You are imitating Lady Chalice." Oh

dear no ! she was the last person whom Ray-Hilton intended so to flatter ; they would have pitied you for an idiot had you hinted at any such weakness on their parts. But still, there were not a few things on record at which, when first suggested, " everyone " had set up bristles and bidden defiance after the manner of enraged porcupines ; which, notwithstanding, grew into institutions at last. How, or why, no one knew, and certainly no one confessed that Lady Ohalice had been the first to institute them.

Therefore, one evening when the sunset was throwing the shadows of the cedars long and black across the lawn at Castlerock, when everyone was tired after the first hot day of summer ; Lady Ohalice, having " escaped the children," as she called it, sat herself down to rest under an old oak tree in the park. It was a well-known retreat of hers, and had been christened " Mother's seat," because " mother " often flew away there for refuge from the noises of the young people. This tree was at the bottom of the park, on the borders of a miniature wood, where pheasants roamed in wild domesticity and squirrels built their nests. There was nothing of the recluse in Lady Ohalice's nature, remember ; she loved to laugh and joke and even romp with her children ; for all that, she often blessed the silence of the oak tree afterwards with a fervent benediction because it brought her peace.

To-day she read and thought, and this was the manner of

her thinking : " Was man, after all, nothing but a beautified ape ? Have we grown by invisible stages from the earth and the water and the air ? " It would seem to be so if truth lay in the volume she was studying. Darwin had set it forth clearly enough, and hers was a mind which found itself able to grasp the subject. And yet!—"if it were true, what then ?" she asked herself ; trying to answer with the poet :

Dust thou art, to dust returnest,
Was *not* spoken of the soul.

For years she had hoped to persuade herself that Divine inspiration was the source of human fervour ; her hair had grown grey in the teaching of some such simple faith. And now, when her day-star of life had passed its zenith and was sinking slowly towards its setting, she could see no ground on which to base a belief in individual immortality ; a hope that the conscious *I* would be to all eternity sensible of its own rewards and appreciative of its own progression. She could only feel that it *ought* to be so, and hope, and nurse a dream of substanceless possibilities, which, as she read and thought, seemed to be slipping out of her grasp. Yet she read on, as she had always done, and reasoned, fearless of the result.

Her head was bent over the book, and her eyes fixed upon its pages ; those eyes which children kissed and feared, and a

husband trusted for their unfailing honesty. So that Lady Chalice, although no longer young, was lovely and beloved—a wife and a mother. Old in years, but young in spirit, she could be a very child among her children, but ever a woman at her husband's side.

A stranger came suddenly out of the wood and stood still before her, almost close to her—for her presence had not been noticed by him—and remained looking around with an air of impatient annoyance. But she, seeing him there, rose with a stately and winning grace peculiar to herself, bowed, and addressed him.

“Are you looking for anyone? Perhaps I can help you.”

“Your pardon,” lifting his hat; “I have missed my way—I am trespassing.”

“This is private property—yes. Allow me to put you upon the right road; you are not much out of your way.”

She raised her eyes to his face, and they seemed riveted there. She had always a way of looking arrow-straight at people, so that the dishonest quailed before her. But the expression on this occasion was one of puzzled inquiry. For a moment her hand pulled nervously at the lace lappet of her cap, and some strong feeling changed the expression of her face. But she was never afraid to speak her thoughts, and so said, rather abruptly,

"Surely I know you?—at least, you recall someone I did know very intimately once. You must be a relation. You are his ditto." Then calming from her momentary excitement—"Pardon my remarks, they must seem somewhat extraordinary, but may I ask your name?"

"Certainly. Aram—Paul Aram," very coolly.

"I thought so. And your father is——"

"*Was* Dr. Wallace Aram, of Manchester *celebrity*," sarcastically. "He is dead."

"Then you *are* really——"

"Nominally," he interrupted, "nominally his son, actually an outcast from his house and family."

Paul Aram spoke impatiently, almost rudely, showing an evident dislike to being questioned. He had a stern face; eyes deep set but piercing, and lips compressed with a firm unyielding pressure. He was not old like the woman before him, but her five-and-fifty years seemed to have brought her more peace than his thirty; for while her brow was calm and white, his seemed contracted and lined with much suffering.

At the mention of Dr. Aram's name a smile bright as a girl's broke over Lady Challice's face. But the man's lips only pressed themselves more tightly together, and the hard expression of his features grew harder still. She held out her hand to him.

"I recognised you at once, you are *so* like your father. But

you don't know me, of course. I will tell you in a word. Wallace Aram and I were great friends—*more* than friends once." Just a perceptible hesitation. "You cannot know how much I am interested in everything that concerns him."

"Then you will not be interested in me, for I never did concern him."

"What? his son!"

"Consequently a sceptic as to the existence of natural affection. It has to be learnt like the alphabet; we begin early, and it becomes second nature, but it's easily forgotten—at least *my* father found no difficulty in forgetting that I was his son."

"Is it possible that you forgot him first?" Lady Challice asked, with her native honesty.

"Quite possible," he answered, releasing his hand, which she had unconsciously held in her own longer than it is usual to retain that of a stranger.

"Now do sit down here and talk to me," she said, kindly, as she might have addressed one of her own sons. "Or stop! we will walk up towards the house together, and chat on the way. I have so much to ask you, so many hows and whens and wheres to satisfy. Talking will give you an appetite, or ought to do so, and I think we shall find supper ready when we get in. You must come and be introduced to my young folk."

"Thank you; no," he said, impatiently, tearing a twig off a

drooping bough of the tree and crushing it up in his hand as if it were some obnoxious creeping thing out of which he would wrench the life before casting it from him.

"Now I think you might be civil to an old friend and come ; besides, I can put in a claim to your *obedience*, if you will only trust me till I shall have explained. You are quite an old acquaintance of mine, setting your father out of the question."

"Much obliged, but I cannot accept your invitation. It is quite impossible, believe me."

"The old story, I suppose. Young men in these days are always so busy—they haven't a moment at their own disposal. Is that it?"

"Nothing so fashionable, I assure you," with a softening smile, which changed in an instant the whole tone of his expression.

"Dinner is waiting for me at Hilton Abbey."

"Hilton Abbey! Are you staying there?" with an air of surprise, of which the stately and placid Lady Challice was rarely guilty.

The introduction of this new and, to every Ray-Hilton inhabitant, interesting subject, had the effect of causing her to forget past associations in a present desire to learn something, if possible, about the new comer at the Abbey, upon whom no one, not even her independent self, had found courage to call.

Paul Aram had only bent his head in answer to her question

as to whether he was staying with Mrs. Grant, so, not being satisfied, she continued in her old straightforward way.

"Now the inducement to detain you is doubled." A pause. "You *must* tell me something about our new neighbour." Then, seeing a look of great annoyance come over his face, she hastened to add, "I don't ask out of mere curiosity, please remember; but she is a perfect stranger to everyone in Ray-Hilton, and—well, rather unconventional, as far as we can gather. No one has summoned courage to call upon her and find out what she is, I amongst the number, but I confess to feeling the strongest desire to know anyone so original as she must be. If, now, I could only hear that she is not objectionable—you know what I mean. If she is a fit companion for my daughters, and a person of whom I need not hesitate to make a friend, I would once more take the Ray-Hilton bull of prejudice by the horns and lead it by calling on Mrs. Grant."

"You speak of friendship. Are you compelled to make a friend of every acquaintance?"

"There's no moral coercion, certainly, but at Castlerock we all have the strongest dislike to pasteboard acquaintance, beginning and ending in an occasional afternoon call and a dinner so many times a year. When we care to know people at all, we know them really; they become a part of our lives, and share our interests. In short, they soon learn our history from beginning

to end, and we theirs. If such an intimacy is not possible, I never even pretend to an acquaintance. They call me unsociable here in Ray-Hilton, and indeed they are in some measure justified."

Again her face grew beautiful with its smile of heart-gladness, and Paul Aram, looking at her, thought her a very impersonation of all womanly grace. He mentally likened her to some soft cadence of music which, dying away in its intensity, lingered still in the ear and on the brain—an influence, a sensation of peace and calm which seemed to say to the surging waves of this world's troubles, "Peace, be still." At least he felt it so, and opened his heart to her, speaking freely at last.

"I can only give you a rough sketch of—of—the person you are speaking about," he said, and his voice grew very intense. "I shall paint it badly, no doubt, and it may not satisfy you. The details must necessarily be imperfect; I can put in no surroundings and no background—Do you care to have such an unfinished work?"

"Certainly, so long as what you *do* paint be conscientiously done. Let me see it then, quickly."

"Well, to start with, she is the one woman I have ever met who possesses a mind and a soul and—yes—and a heart."

"But different people have different ideas of mind and soul. What are yours?"

"By mind, I don't mean that shallow, contracted thing which is only capable of receiving little and giving less. By soul, I do not understand that pitiful conception which we have endowed with no higher power than to float between heaven and earth, in one atmosphere, and on one prescribed path, like a prisoner held in bondage by a voice which is perpetually calling after it, 'Thus far shalt thou go, and no farther.' Do you follow me?"

"Yes, and agree. Now for your heart—How about our heroine's heart?"

"Simply that it is not one of those sickly organs which beat loudly for a few moments, and then stop; unless some new excitement sets them going again for another moment."

"Very well; now, having told me what she is *not*, suppose you let me hear what she *is*."

He answered her with something of his old hardness, and his eyes were fixed upon the ground. "She has a mind which can receive and give; a soul which can conceive a Deity—and she is *a woman*. What more would you learn of her, Lady Challice; for I know now to whom I am speaking?"

"Unfortunately, social distinctions require more—her birth, her parentage, her manner of life. She may be all you say, and yet a person I and my children could not visit because of the odium which would fall upon *them* were they known

to associate with a woman of doubtful social standing. For myself I should not care, but they are young; their paths in life are not yet fixed. I should have no right to expose them to '*the world's taunts and the world's jeers*,' nor, indeed, to complete the quotation, to '*the pity of friends*,' which is the most humiliating part. If you cannot tell me more, you can at least say whether this Mrs. Grant is a fit companion for the children of honest men and women who are forced to maintain a certain social position and code of morals? In short, to put it plainly, is there nothing in Mrs. Grant's history, past or present, which, if discovered, would injure my girls? For, remember this, where we know, we love; and where we love, we are true so long as truth be possible. You see I am trusting Wallace Aram's son to speak on his honour. Now, answer me, Paul—What is she (socially), this Mrs. Grant?"

"Her life is as honest as your own. She has done nothing to be ashamed of *ever*, and much to glory in. She is a woman with all womanly virtues. Are you content?"

"She—er—she is married?" There was just a shade of doubt in this affirmative query, and again a nervous twitch at the lappet of her cap. But he answered "*Yes*," unhesitatingly.

"And her husband is——"

can tell you nothing about him." Paul Aram spoke

angrily, and ground the heel of his boot into the moss-grown soil. Then, for the first time, Lady Challice noticed that the boot in question was an exceedingly shabby one, and the whole dress of the man not at all what she would have expected to see in the son of her old friend, whom she had known as a man of substance. Her companion divined at once that she was struck by his personal appearance, and he laughed aloud. But there was no mirth in the expression; it was rather a wordless satire.

"You are astonished," he sneered at last, casting his eyes down over himself. He knew quite well the direction her thoughts had taken.

"But your father was so rich"—she hesitated, in an apologetic tone.

"Yes, and I am so poor; extremes meet, you see; the balance has been neatly adjusted. But I must go now. Time was made for slaves, and I *am* a slave in every sense of the word. Good bye!"

"But you will come in to supper. I have heard nothing about you yet—neither have you of me. Do relent!"

"Thank you—no."

"For a few moments, then—just to have a glass of wine."

"It is impossible."

"But how about all my old friends? I must have news of

them! Well—listen. Will you come and call on us? To-morrow, say?”

“Let me explain myself, Lady Challice. I owe it to your kind interest in me.” He spoke very softly now. Strange, what changes this man’s voice and manner could undergo! A moment, and it is hard, cold, cynical—another, and it is low, passion-moved, intense—yet a third, and the whole world is derided and lashed to scorn.

Lady Challice had known and loved the father; she loved the son without knowing him—loved him for the very faults she saw glaring out all bare and ugly to look upon. They only seemed to her as garments in which he had chosen to clothe himself that the world should not discover the tender spots or the wounds which lay beneath. And she judged rightly. It was bad enough to have sore places; worse that men should see them, and more cutting still that a woman should have discovered their existence. But this woman had somehow compelled his sympathies, and, to a certain extent, he could humble himself before her.

“Let me explain. I am an outcast, an alien from my people; one against whom the doors of respectable houses would be—well, closed with an apology for a bang, only that I never ask them to open to me. My father’s was the first which slammed Good-bye at me. I have taken care

not to invite the compliment from another. I shall still take care not to do so; yours least of all—for your daughters' sake, as you most justly remarked a moment ago."

"We grow satirical! But you forget—you are even now staying with Mrs. Grant, and I have your word of honour that she is a person I need not hesitate to visit. If *she* receives you, why cannot I, who feel almost as a mother towards you?" and indeed there was a yearning tenderness in her eyes and in her voice, as she laid her hand, mother-like, on his shoulder, which affected him strangely.

Paul Aram knew the story of this woman's love for his father long ago in the days of their youth. It had been told him by his mother, and he remembered every detail of that dead romance now as he stood face to face with its heroine. When quite a boy he had worshipped the ideal woman who had been so nobly unselfish in her love for his stern parent; she who had slain her own heart to save Wallace Aram from a ruin he would have forced upon himself by marrying her. It was the old story of a tyrannical will which forbade Wallace Aram to marry the woman to whom he was pledged on pain of losing all his expected fortune. Boy-like, he had wished to throw it over, pleading to her passionately that for love the world were well lost. But Mary Lee knew the man and his bringing up, knew that he was one whom

poverty would have driven straightway hellwards. So with a woman's best strength she sent him from her, to save him from himself. It was done with one strong wrench, which threw him far away, once and for ever out of her reach ; an effort so strong that her poor young sinews were strained and her bones dislocated in the throwing. But she had judged him rightly, and only a year afterwards he came to thank her for "saving him," as he termed it. *Thanked her*, even while her limbs were still aching so cruelly that there was no rest for her by night or day. But he never noticed it. He had a wife then and a son, and what was Mary Lee to him or them ? She only stooped and kissed the child, blessing it silently for its father's sake. Then she went forth into the world, never to meet him again. Time healed her wounds, and to-day she could bear to hear that he was dead. As Paul Aram was now in person, such had his father been when Mary Lee loved him. As she had before blessed the baby boy lying in its stranger-mother's arms, so she now blessed the man standing by her side—outcast, sinner, though he represented himself. She longed to take him to her heart even as one of her own children. But Paul Aram was cruel ; he would not accept her fondness, and, instead, turned from her, wrapping himself again in his cloak of misanthropical cynicism. He was angry at her allusion to his acquaintance with Constance Grant, and replied tersely—

"To whom am I answerable for my friendships?" resenting her implication that if he could visit one honest woman he could visit another, who claimed to have a greater right of interest in him from their old association. But in a moment he softened again, and, holding out his hand, said:

"Forgive me. I forgot that I was speaking to *you*, but, indeed, I cannot know you or yours. You would be kinder not to press it. You can believe, surely, that it is no pleasure to me to refuse the very first offer of hospitality which has ever been made to me in all honesty and kindness. But you don't know. Good-bye."

"Let me know—tell me all," she said quickly. But he was gone; far away even now, hidden from her sight by the thick hazel bushes of the wood. Only the birds were singing Good-night around her, only the squirrels were jumping about in the trees; and her own heart beating the sole response to her empty pleading.

Something had come, and something had gone, without leaving anything substantial in its place—and she was alone.

The stars were coming out, Venus looked down so coldly upon her that she shivered under the pale steady light. "What! Vesper again," she said. "Why it seems only yesterday that I called you Lucifer! How quickly time passes!" Then she walked back to the house; up the long hill, and through the

shrubbery walk, till, on reaching the lawn, her children seeing her, called out,

“Mother! where have you been? Why, we’ve all finished supper.”

And there was no more peace for Lady Challice. She had returned to the arms of her chattering, romping, generally high-spirited family.





CHAPTER III.

THEY were all gathered together at breakfast—the Challice family, from first to last. Only just eight o'clock, and a gay summer morning. Fresh breezes, sweet scents, and a joyful singing of birds outside, echoed by a wild chattering of young voices inside. The peace of nature abroad, and goodwill amongst men at home. As happy a household as our domestic England could show. Father, mother, and children, all knit together in that bond which nothing outweighs—mutual sympathy and trust. Yet more than most people, the Challices had each a distinct mode of life and widely varying occupations; but the whole was harmony. There were three boys and three girls, some standing even now

Where the brook and river meet.

Others, who having stepped across safely, thought it not unwise to lend a helping hand to those “reluctant feet” which were hesitating on the brink.

This morning they were very lavish of their noise, chattering unrestrained about horses, dogs, friends, or foes; ; tangling up a heterogeneous mass of conversation, incomprehensible to any listener save the one immediately interested; but a matter of life and death, no doubt, as are all the affairs of our youth.

After a time the mother's hand took up those stray ends of conversation and led them skilfully over one great wheel of mutual interest.

"Children," she said, addressing those assembled, "I am going to enter upon a piece of new and important business to-day. A penny for the one who guesses it first."

Bides, drives, pic-nics, balls; plantings out, and gatherings in, were tossed at her as so many solutions of her enigma. At last they gave it up.

"Prepare to receive fire, then, boys."

"All right; fire away."

"I am going to call at Hilton Abbey!!!"

"Hilton Abbey! on Mrs. Grant!" cried six voices in concert.

"Yes."

"No!!!" chorus.

"Yes, I say."

A moment's silence, then a general movement, and the buzz of great excitement. Interrogations, speculations, were dashed recklessly about, whirled hither and thither by the mill-wheels

of young curiosity. These, after being allowed to turn on at their own pace for a time, were stopped at last by the same master-hand which ruled everything at Castlerock—Lady Challice said to them :

“Be sensible for once, if possible, all of you, and listen to what I am about to tell. It is better than a novel, I assure you, Olive,” turning to her second daughter. “Yesterday you wanted to know what made me late for supper. Well, it was this. When I was sitting under *the tree* reading, I looked up suddenly (one always looks up suddenly in a novel, you know), and who should I see standing before me but the son of an old—old—well, shall I tell you?—old lover of mine.” Then, seeing all their wicked eyes turned immediately upon father, she continued, laughing at their excitement, “Oh, he knows all about it; you need not look at him to see whether his eyes are growing green at my admission. It’s quite a stale story. Dorothy has heard it, and Bertrand; it’s only you poor ill-used younger members who have not been let into the secret. But to go on. My hero’s name is Paul Aram, and if possible I shall get him here for you all to see.—In the meantime he is staying at Hilton Abbey, and has told me all about Mrs. Grant.” This was addressed more particularly to the elder members of the family.

“I’m sure she’s nice,” said Ella, enthusiastically, she being the

youngest and—as was self-evident—the spoilt one of the family. “I passed her one day, and she looks a *darling*. Oh! and wasn’t her dress lovely, just!”

“Well, what about her, mother?” asked Captain Challice, feeling a natural and soldierly interest in all pretty women.

“She must be an intellectual woman, Guy, and a refined—but that we shall soon discover for ourselves. The point is this: A gentleman, and the son of my oldest friend, assures me that she is such a woman as I may, without hesitation, ask to my house. Father and I talked it all over last night, and the re——”

“What’s that you are saying, my dear?” inquired Sir Hugh, looking up over the wall of his *Field* newspaper and pushing his spectacles into his thick white hair. “‘Father and I talked it over.’ Did we, though? *You* talked, it strikes me, and a patient slave listened as long as he could. But I swear to you, my dear, you had the latter part of the discussion entirely to yourself, for I fell asleep, thank the Lord. No matter. You had settled it all beforehand, I make no doubt.” Then, turning to the young people with good-natured jocosity, “We are so conventional, children, and so proper here in Ray-Hilton. We ask advice of our parents and husbands—flatter them, you know; stroke them the right way, like nice warm pussy cats, *who never did us any harm*—and then we go straight on our own road again, eh?”

"I can answer for you at least, governor," said Captain Challice. "We know where the Challice obstinacy comes from—Another chop, please, mater."

"And the Challice appetite, too, Guy," interrupted Ella, aged twelve years, and precocious in proportion. "But how horrid of you both to stop mother just at the very most interesting part of her story."

"Or the part you like best—which?"

But Ella, ignoring her brother's retort, continued, addressing her mother:

"And I must go with you to call on Mrs. Grant, because I know I shall *adore* her. Isn't she beautiful?" with childish enthusiasm. "Can I go, mother?"

"No; you cannot, little Mrs. Curiosity."

"Of course you want *me* to keep you company?" said Miss Challice, never doubting; she being her mother's second in all social matters.

"No, Dorothy; I am going to call on Mrs. Grant alone."

"Why so, mother?"

"Because it will be easier to manage matters afterwards should I not like her, do you see?"

"Can't say I do quite see; but I know by the expression of your thumbs that you don't intend to argue, so, with Diogenes-like resignation, I retire to the privacy of my own *tub*, otherwise

room. Come along, Ella ; we've those German declensions to get through before Herr Gutman comes, and only an hour to do it in."

"Bother!!" was the reply of Mademoiselle Bébé, as the French ex-bonne still called Ella ; but she meekly followed her sister out of the room, with "Pumps," alias "Lionel," alias "The Boy," close behind his boon companion in all the sports and mischiefs of youth.

"Of course it's all right, mother?" hesitated Bertrand, who as eldest son considered that the honour of the family rested upon his devoted shoulders.

He was alluding to the unfortunate Mrs. Grant again, with the implied doubt as to her reputability, which, even among men, floated like motes across the sunbeams of her undoubted beauty. The fact is, that superior beings as they chose to consider themselves, they were not proof against the distorting influence (unacknowledged) of the cracks in the window-panes through which they looked at the young widow—cracks and scratches made by the little pebbles which their wives and sisters were wont to amuse themselves by casting at her from a safe distance ; knowing full well that no return-stone, however cleverly aimed, could injure them in their well-built brick-and-mortar dwelling places.

Lady Challice assured Bertrand that she would take upon herself the responsibility of once again leading Bay-Hilton in a

way it had determined *not* to tread. But, first, she must see what manner of woman Mrs. Grant might prove to be—exteriorly at any rate. The carriage was already ordered for three o'clock, and she was going—going alone, too, as she had told Dorothy.

Now, Lady Challice had a curious way of clasping her hands and pressing the two thumbs one over the other when she intended to be quite immovable upon any subject. Her children had from infancy learnt the meaning of this sign, and to that day they none of them ever tried to oppose “mother’s thumbs.” So on the present occasion mother’s thumbs were firmly pressed down, and no more was said about going with her to Hilton Abbey.

Many feelings had moved Lady Challice, apart from a desire to know Mrs. Owen Grant. The idea had taken possession of her mind that Paul Aram was somehow floundering about in the muddy ditches of human follies, sins, or misfortunes. She knew of old how strong to save a woman’s hand may prove, how a sinner once lifted clear out of the slough of despond may, from experience of its slimy unpleasantness, decline to plunge headlong into it again—that is to say, if he have any senses left; and Lady Challice did not believe all men fools. On the other hand, she had never credited herself with any supreme wisdom; but she did accept it as a truth that many a

novels, and sent all the girls in Ray-Hilton crazy, because of his dreamy violet eyes and his long white hands. His father looked upon him as an utter failure, a delusion, and a snare; he would fain have seen the future Sir Bertrand Challice a fox-hunting, farming squire, after the good old types of the squires of Castle-rock for generations back. "Guy's worth a dozen of him," Sir Hugh often said; and yet by some strange incongruity of circumstances Lady Challice cared more for this stepson than for either of her own children. His tender nature, his delicately tuned nervous sensibility seemed more in harmony with her inner life than the buoyant spirits and strongly marked characteristics of her own boys and girls.



had drawn them together in the beginning. Their affection was pure and true now in the decline of years; she was the life of his life, and the soul of his soul. And why? Because the days and the months and the years had moulded them, each after the form and likeness of the other, in the mould of mutual sympathies and identical interests.

Her first child was Guy—tall, soldierly-looking Guy—Captain Challice now, or “the Captain,” as the servants called him. “One of the right sort,” his brother officers said, and “A real gentleman, if ever there was one,” echoed the tenants and farmers on the Castlerock estate. Such were a few of his friends’ opinions respecting Captain Challice, and they may be taken as types of that of society generally. At home, when Guy was coming back “on leave,” the children, Ella and Pumps, were wont to caper over the lawn, turning somersaults and screaming, “Guy is coming! Guy is coming! oh, what jolly larks we will have!!” Dorothy, going into his room, looked over his guns, rods, spurs, and hunting clothes, to be sure that all was as he would wish to see it. And Olive—the beauty of the family—brushed her riding habit, bought new gloves, and dressed her hair in the fashion Guy liked best. All of which little sisterly attentions will give a very fair idea of Captain Challice’s standing at home.

Bertrand lived in his books and the clouds; wrote poetry and

off into the parlour of the King's Head, there to be "pumped" over his cups. Anner Marier was conducted into Mrs. Brown's "drawin' room," where she found herself surrounded by a host of admiring friends, and the heroine of the hour. How affectionately they pressed her to recount all she had seen on this eventful afternoon! Even the precise shape and colour of "her ladyship's" bonnet was by no means to be omitted as an incident of the exciting tale.

Lady Challice had been lifted up a step on the social ladder by her tradespeople and tenants; she was always "her ladyship" amongst them, for, you see, The Lady Maude Legrande of Stretting was thus addressed by her neighbours, and why should Stretting (which was only four miles from Ray-Hilton) have a greater personage as its centre of gravity than the undeniably more aristocratic Ray-Hilton? Accordingly, Sir Hugh's wife was "her ladyship," and The Lady Maude was "her ladyship of Stretting"; and if any impertinent stranger suggested that there might be some difference in the rank of these two stars, Ray-Hilton butchers, bakers, and farmers would have looked upon that stranger as an ignoramus of the lowest degree—a person wanting in all moral virtues—and a Radical! which last was the most opprobrious term Ray-Hilton could be goaded into applying to any sinner.

It will now be seen in what kind of place and amongst what

people Mrs. Grant had settled herself, and how much allowance was likely to be made for her more modern and generally enlarged ideas of life.

So, whilst the heroic Anner Marier was watching at the gate of Hilton Abbey with praiseworthy patience, and perseverance which would have done honour to a better cause, Lady Challice waited also, inside the house—waited for the coming down of her new friend or foe, as fate might hereafter will it.

She had been shown into a room, the like of which she had never seen before. It impressed her as resembling more the inside of some richly-coloured Catholic church of Italy or Spain, such as she had seen them in drawings, than any ordinary sitting room. The high gothic windows were all of stained glass and the rafters of oak. The walls were frescoed with classic idealisations of various old myths, things soft in colouring, graceful in form and fancy. The floor was inlaid with various coloured woods, making fantastic pictures under foot, but covered here and there with skins and rugs of curious workmanship. In each corner of this room were mimic shrines, before which waxen tapers burned, and on which lay more beautiful things than Lady Challice had ever seen together. On one altar were wonderful cups and vases of wrought gold and silver, all jewelled and glowing; on another statuettes, in alabaster and marble, each graven by a master of his art. Miniature pictures

on ivory and porcelain hung about a third; and on a fourth were world-old jewels and other personal adornments. Every object in the room was a work of art, signed or otherwise proven, and of priceless value. Even the chairs and tables were of form and workmanship unlike any Lady Challice had ever seen. Constance Grant had designed them all herself, and they had been executed for her alone.

This was not half of what Lady Challice might have noticed had time been given her, but very soon the heavy oaken door, gothic arched and carved, was opened with great deliberation, and the *bête noire* of Ray-Hilton stood calm and stately face to face with Ray-Hilton's highest potentate.

Constance might have been a girl not yet out of her teens, so young and fresh she looked, dressed all in white, with the mingled lights from the coloured windows falling upon her, and a basket of exotic flowers in her hand. And in truth she had only known seven and twenty birthdays. Of these, half had been danced and sung away under the sunshines and the moonlights of southern lands, and the other half wept away in passionate life-nipping tears. But that was all in the past; the restless river had swept clear its own channel and was now flowing peacefully on towards the sea.

"Lady Challice, I believe?" Constance said, bowing and waiting proudly to be addressed. She naturally supposed that this

call was on some matter of business connected with the parish ; the church, the schools, or drainage perhaps ; something certainly in which a Ray-Hilton "family" could, without fear of consequences, "treat" with an "unvisited" neighbour. This being the idea which possessed Mrs. Grant, she was naturally rather on the defensive from the beginning.

But Lady Challice, keen of perception always, saw at once the ground which Mrs. Grant had taken, and hastened to explain, returning a bow and a smile in exchange for her hostess's haughty greeting.

"I confess it is rather late to call on you for the first time, but I think I can make you understand my conduct if you will pardon me far enough to listen."

"I am glad to see you," Constance answered formally. But now she came and sat near to Lady Challice, showing her the flowers, and beginning to talk of them as some leading subject for polite conversation. Lady Challice would not be so excused, however ; she had determined from the first to act honestly with Mrs. Grant. Accordingly, after just admiring the orchids, she laid them aside and returned to her original subject ; saying, in her very straightforward way,

"I don't suppose I should ever have known you had not chance come to my rescue. I met your friend Mr. Paul Aram yesterday. He told you about it, no doubt ?"

"Yes; he did."

"And that I am quite an old friend of his family?"

"He said so; yes," bending her head very low over the flowers.

"And it follows of course that he mentioned my having asked him a great many questions about you, and my ultimately saying I should call?"

"No; he did not mention that."

"Indeed! well, I did so, and I hope you will forgive me."

"You were perfectly justified in asking any questions about me and mine; believe me, it wants no apology." She looked up straight into her visitor's eyes now, but a flush burnt on her cheek.

"I did not mean to apologise; not at least in the ordinary sense of the term, but I want you to understand me. You came to Ray-Hilton a perfect stranger to everyone; you surprised everyone, for you see you are so young and—may I say it?—so beautiful to be living alone—so independent, too, that you did not seek our acquaintance. Now, you must know the world well enough to be sure that these things were in themselves sufficient to set your name in everybody's mouth. Your coming created quite a sensation, I assure you." Lady Chalice laughed; but Constance only said,

"Why do you stop? Well, you have come to a difficult point in your story; let me finish it for you; it will sound better

from me. I *do* know the world, and I am sure that people having once taken me in hand set to work to examine me—magnify me, possibly, as they would magnify some curious monad, to find out my Genus and Family. That not succeeding, they theorised on the subject, as we do on all natural problems, and, as usual, those theories being based upon the unknown, were purely speculative. Very satisfactory, doubtless, and convenient, as capable of unlimited expansion. In short, I became a heroine of fashionable fiction, and that speaks for my good character, I hope.” She tore a petal from the flower and rolled it between her fingers, being slightly nervous now.

“You are very satirical,” Lady Challice answered, “but be just. We could not know by intuition who or what you are, and you must allow that in this world we are obliged to pick our acquaintance. Had any of us met any person who knew you, we should have called long ago; or, let me speak for myself, I should. You see that on the strength of having met one of your acquaintance, I have come to atone for past neglect. Do you understand me?”

“Perfectly, from the very first. Were I also one of Ray-Hilton county families, I should not have called upon a *stranger*. Happily for me, I am of the class nobody, and able to pick up my friends in the highways and byways of life. I assure you there is no small interest in finding out what people are made of; at

the same time I do not for a moment suppose that every woman dare explore for herself ; consequently the whole of Ray-Hilton stands guiltless in the matter of its prudence regarding me." (There was a pause.) Then Constance, changing her manner altogether, said with winning softness—"It is kind of you to have called, Lady Challice," and held out her hand in token of good fellowship, whilst her wonderful dark grey eyes looked smiling out from under the thick veil of lashes which, shadowing them so completely, made them appear almost black in the sombre light of a room, whereas they were very far from being so in reality. Those eyes were the characteristic feature of Constance Grant's face ; strange eyes, which by a look could lay the world at her feet if she willed it so—eyes which changed with the moment, giving voice to every human passion in its turn.

Lady Challice pressed the hand offered to her, and sealed a bond of good-will between them so far as she was concerned. Nevertheless she felt certain that it would be no easy matter to fathom the woman before her, girl though she seemed. Difficult to know her, indeed, but yet how fatally easy to love—deserving or undeserving, to kneel down and blindly worship the mere physical beauty with which Nature had gifted her—and so to fall unawares into the snare which it was so evidently in her power to lay for weak humanity.

At this moment the afternoon tea came in, brought to them in

cups of Dresden china, rich and chaste, for Constance had a horror of the grotesque in anything, and no intrinsic value could compensate to her for ugliness. All her surroundings were beautiful either in form or colouring; even the clothes she wore seemed always fashioned to please the eye rather than to follow any particular prevailing style.

Flitting like some gay-plumed humming bird after the servant who brought the tea, came little Violet; bounding on tip-toe, spinning round and round, and ultimately tossing herself with absolute abandon into Mrs. Grant's lap. This interruption served to change the subject of their conversation.

"What a lovely child!" exclaimed Lady Challice, warmly, as she would have admired some rare flower. "But how utterly unlike you!"

"Is there anything so very surprising in that? You seem to think so. Has Ray-Hilton reported that we are a ditto one of the other?"

"Happily, I hear few of their reports, but one naturally expects to see some resemblance between a parent and child; a family likeness, you know."

Constance Grant laughed aloud, and, stooping, kissed the little lips which had just upraised themselves to hers.

"Oh! I see your mistake—Violet is not *my* child."

Lady Challice was for once utterly confounded. Ray-Hilton

had always rung with the extraordinary devotion of this young mother to her child. Servants had reported how that Violet was never apart from their mistress, how no nurse was kept for her, since she ate and lived and slept by Mrs. Grant's side ; how there was no governess even, because the same careful hand guided her education, mental and physical. Who could suppose that any other than a mother would have such devotion ? No one had ever doubted the relationship, and behold ! Mrs. Grant calmly denies it in the very first interview.

Lady Challice tried to hide her surprise, and replied interrogatively,

“A near relation, of course ?”

“None ” was answered in a lower, sadder tone, while her arms were wound tightly round the little shy bird which cuddled into her lap, and hid its face in the folds of her dress.

Lady Challice scarcely knew what to say next ; every remark she hazarded seemed to be exactly the wrong one. She did not wish to appear to question Mrs. Grant, and yet—it was all so strange, such a mystery that some explanation seemed wanting. However, it was not forthcoming, for an awkward silence ensued until Constance Grant, taking one of the orchids from the basket on the table, gave it to Violet, saying,

“Don't be shy, little one. Look up—so,” raising the golden head. “See, here is one of your pet dolly's wash-pots,” and

then, turning to Lady Challice, she explained. "That is what Violet calls this cypripedium ; not a bad name, is it?" showing one of the pitcher-shaped orchids. Then, addressing the child again, "Run up, and put it in the red vase in our room, and these others," giving the basket, "in the boudoir. Arrange them prettily now, or I shall toss them all away, as I did those poor roses you insulted by setting the wrong colours side by side. Now trot along, and don't appear again for half an hour."

"One more little, tiny kiss, Constance," the child said, obeying ; and Lady Challice wondered still more to hear this small thing call Mrs. Grant "Constance," as though she were some little companion of her own age. How strange it all seemed ! even to the generally unconventional Lady Challice, and how she longed for some enlightenment ! It was not to be, evidently, for when the child was gone and the flowers were gone, and there seemed nothing to talk about beyond the merest commonplaces of a formal morning call, when these were growing wearisome and Lady Challice was thinking of going, the door opened again, and Paul Aram found himself in the middle of the room before he noticed the presence of a stranger there. Having made the discovery, his brow contracted and he clenched his hand, as if he looked upon Lady Challice's visit as an intrusion and was minded to resent it. But in a moment he remembered,

took the hand which she held out to him, hoped she was well, and then, addressing Constance Grant, said,

"I came in to tell you that I am off now; there's just time to catch the 4.30."

"Very well; I shall see you next week?" she questioned, with a strange tone and manner, which Lady Challice fancied showed dislike for Paul Aram's company.

"Can't say," he answered, in the same offhand way. "Hamlet and I are agreed on one point. We know what we are, but know not what we may be. He was evidently uncertain of his future status—even you may lock your door on me next week." He spoke with cynical bitterness, but she did not answer him. Lady Challice used the opportunity for the furthering of her own motherly plans.

"I told you yesterday, Paul (I must call you Paul; why, it was I who chose the name for you!)—I told you that your father's son is mine, if he will accept my protection, directly or indirectly. *My* doors are open to you now and always; remember that."

"Your offer is kindly meant, but scarcely prudently considered. How about your daughters, who were to be so carefully protected?" smiling satirically. "Good bye." He gave her his hand, which she tried to retain, holding him back while she said, looking into his face with eyes full of

sympathy for the troubles of his life, whatever they might be. "Not yet ; don't go yet ; let me speak with you for another moment—there is still so much unsaid."

"Which in the saying would just allow time for the train to steam away, leaving me stranded here. No, Lady Challice ; we business men," with a sneer, "can't afford time even to make friends."

"Come, now, you don't work on Sundays?" cheerfully. "Run over to Castlerock on Sunday, will you?"

"Impossible."

"Give me your ad——" But before she could frame the request he had released his hand from hers and left the room. No other word, except the conventional "Good bye," either to her or to Constance, who sat idly turning over the leaves of an album on the small table by her side. They were alone again, and Lady Challice, not being accustomed to find herself beaten, made the half-spoken request to Mrs. Grant, as his substitute.

"You will give me his address?" she said, confidently, sitting down again by Constance's side. "I can see that he is in some trouble, and it is surely not possible that with both the will and the means I can fail to be of use as a friend. I must see more of him ; get him to confide in me—by degrees, of course. You know where he lives ; kindly tell me, for his own sake."

Looking into her companion's face, Lady Challice noted the colour coming and going in her cheeks, and the lips pressing themselves tightly together, apparently to still some involuntary trembling of the mouth. There was evident pain expressed on every feature, but she spoke quite distinctly and calmly.

"I cannot give it to you. I may not. He would forbid me."

"But for his good, would you not risk his displeasure?"

"Under certain circumstances I might, but this is not the occasion. I dare not so far offend him—nor, indeed, do I wish to."

"You are afraid of him, it seems," coldly.

"Yes, if you will have it so." Then, almost instantly altering her tone and manner, she continued in her old proud way, speaking very deliberately: "But, Lady Challice, if you intend to continue our acquaintance, the subject of Mr. Paul Aram"—her voice fell again and wavered, but quickly recovered itself—"must be forbidden between us. It is a painful one, and I ask as a favour for your silence, now and always."

"Certainly; I am sorry I have entered upon it." Lady Challice bowed somewhat stiffly, and although she tried to appear unconcerned, her tone expressed annoyance. She had been thwarted by any neighbour before; it was a novel one, and unpleasant. But it was not in her nature to so petty a feeling to influence her conduct towards, or

her opinion of, Constance Grant; neither would she so far lower her self-esteem as to show a ruffled temper before a stranger. Accordingly she laid her hand upon the first *article de vertu* which was within her reach, and began to discuss it. It happened to be a small painting in a quaint old jewelled frame.

"Surely this is a Gerard Dow?" she said admiringly. "No one could imitate his marvellous accuracy and finish. Am I mistaken?"

"Such a mistake would be scarcely possible. Have you ever seen a perfectly true copy of his work? I picked that picture up in an old convent at Leyden, Dow's birth-place, you know. Do you admire it?"

"Certainly," looking up quickly, surprised at the question; "don't you?"

"Not in the least."

"And why, may I ask?"

"I detest the Dutch school; it is so utterly devoid of all poetry. Painting should not be realistic, but rather the embodiment of some beautiful soul-conception. A wandering thought, caught and shaped while the divine glow of inspiration still hangs about it."

Lady Challice was not so much listening to what Constance said as looking at the speaker; at the dark liquid light of her

eyes from under the veil of those long black lashes ; at the glow on her lips and cheeks ; at the intense expression which had wrapped every feature. Of a truth she *was* beautiful, this Ray-Hilton wolf in sheep's clothing. Lady Challice had fancied her own daughter Olive lovely until to-day. People said she was perfect, and yet she would not bear comparison with the woman now speaking, her whole soul playing upon her face, her every movement a charm. For a moment Lady Challice forgot to reply, but a silence soon recalled her to the exigencies of polite society, and she said :

“ Then the French school will be more after your heart ? but I might be sure of it without asking. You have made quite a little temple for your two Ary Scheffers.”

“ And they are sacred ; I love them as I loved my old teacher, for whom they were painted—he who first showed me the meaning of art. But you will think me a maniac if you encourage me upon my weakness. Art is my god. Are you shocked ?”

“ Not in the least ; we have all our little idols, which we worship in secret if not openly, offering to them the incense of our life's devotion. But as you are an artist——”

“ No, no—only a devotee.”

“ An artist, I repeat. Look at your surroundings—well, what I was going to say is, that as you take an interest in art—if that

suits you better—there is one man in this village whom you ought to know.”

“Thanks, but I don’t wish for publicity here. Besides, I object to art patrons on principle; they always detract from its purity by the grossness of their handling.”

“Possibly; but it is for Annas Holt’s own sake I speak. It would be *your* part to encourage *him*. Personally I know nothing about him, but I hear that he has great genius, no friends, and an empty pocket. You can complete the picture.”

“Where is he to be found? I will go to him at once.”

“There are difficulties in the way of getting you introduced; but I will think about the how and the where. He is not among my acquaintance, as I said.”

“Introduced!” she laughed gaily. “I never waited for an introduction in my life. When I wish to know people, I go to them and say so. If they like to refuse me, let them; but if this Mr. Holt is an artist by nature and not by profession, I have my pass-word into his heart. Ah, I see you are surprised at my way of talking. I fear I was too badly brought up ever to become a worthy member of Ray-Hilton society. But to return to our artist. He lives alone, of course?”

“No; he—er—has a wife,” with marked restraint of manner.

“A wife! oh, that entirely alters the case—I shall *not* call.”

"Why should she alter your desire to do the man a service? I hope I don't find you already prejudiced by Ray-Hilton *good nature*," satirically.

"My dear Lady Challice," laughing still, "no one ever does any good to a man when his wife is standing by—one quarrels with her instead. No, no; we'll let Mr. and Mrs. Annas Holt daub on their paint undisturbed—happy in the belief that they are flattering art. I might tell them some foreign truths and destroy the innocent simplicity of their lives for ever and a day."

Lady Challice was growing more and more puzzled over Constance Grant. Like her she must, admire her she was bound to—but wonder was the prevailing sentiment towards her just now.

This was indeed a new element which she had taken upon herself to introduce into Ray-Hilton society. How would it be received? Lady Challice knew that whither she led the others would follow in a short time; had she, then, done wrong out of her own selfish desire to become connected with Paul Aram? For Lady Challice did not deny even to herself that this was the mainspring upon which had turned her determination to call upon the man's friend, the only person who knew him in all Ray-Hilton. Perhaps she *had* acted hastily; it was a fault at Castlerock; they were all given to acting upon impulse. But then they never went back. They were as obstinate as rash,

and a deed once done was done for ever, let Ray-Hilton abuse them as it would. Yes, it was done. Lady Challice had *called* upon Mrs. Owen Grant.

There was a little more desultory talk between them on subjects of general interest, and then Lady Challice left her new neighbour. A feeling of regret possessed her, as though she were shut out from some beautiful landscape which she had been looking upon, and of which the influence had filled her heart with its own freshness and poetry. Part of this sentiment was, she knew, due to the room in which she had sat talking to Constance Grant; to the mellowed light stealing in, rainbow-tinted, through the long coloured windows; to the pictures of human soul-purity which hung half veiled before her; to the poetry of the fantastic allegories on the walls around her, and to the little taper-lighted shrines whereon lay the Lares and Penates of Constance Grant's hearth.

But there was something strangely fascinating in the woman herself.





CHAPTER V.

It was on the evening of this same day that a second great wheel of the new Ray-Hilton life element was set in motion—sent whirling round and round that a strange fabric might at last be woven even as the Lachesis of to-day had willed it.

Constance Grant was out walking. Rarely, indeed, did she indulge in exercise; the *dolce far niente* of her life in the south had not served to knit up her muscles or strengthen her frame for much physical exertion; neither had she followed the fashion and gone into training for rowing, tennis, and other manly sports of the period. Constance had never known a day's sickness, only because her constitution was perfect; because no blood taints had been inherited with the clear skin and delicately moulded frame. Had it been otherwise, all the young strength would have died out of her long ago, in the days of her great sorrow; when the love flowers grew in her life and the love fires scorched it, when the love waters ebbed and flowed

there, and surged and raged, till, breaking their bounds at last, they rushed away in one huge torrent which carried everything before it. Nothing remained but a bare, dry chasm to show where they had once lain at peace, sparkling and playing in the sunshine. But it had not killed her, and to-day she was walking in the lanes of Ray-Hilton to work off a restless mood which had come upon her. She was questioning with herself whether she would or would not grasp the hand of Ray-Hilton society, which had been held out to her in the person of Lady Challice. If she were the only one, there could be no doubt, for Constance knew by report enough of the ways of the Castlerock family to be sure that amongst them she would not feel herself misplaced. But there were others, stiff-necked county people, self-satisfied, and proud with the good old pride of race and descent. How should she stand in their midst? It would be impossible for her to humble herself and thereby win their esteem — impossible, even if she wished to do so, because their men would take her by force and crown her, putting a sceptre in her hand and setting her to reign over them with undisputed sway. Of this Constance Grant had no more doubt than you or I have that our children or our mothers will lay their arms about us to-morrow. It had ever been so with her — men had always worshipped, and women generally hated her.

Yes, there was very much to be considered in all this. She had

come to Ray-Hilton for peace and quiet after the fatigues of a London and a Paris season, in which she had been the leading star of a certain artistic constellation well enough known in Europe's great cities. And yet she had rather a curiosity to see of what stuff English county people were made, mentally and morally ; it was a phase of life which had not yet passed before her eyes, amongst the many on which she had looked—and her chief delight was in men and manners generally. But still the matter was not to be decided hastily, and, the better to think undisturbed, Constance had left Violet at home and wandered out into the lanes alone this delicious summer evening.

She had walked aimlessly about the highways and bye-ways of Ray-Hilton, enjoying the novelty of exercise and the tranquillity of nature as it lay around her, glowing in the sunset.

Presently she turned a sharp corner into a very narrow lane and—Alas ! there was no more quiet for her then. Someone ran against her—nearly knocked her over—apologised—rushed wildly about—and caused a general sense of scuffling and derangement. All Constance could take in of the scene was, a very small woman and a very huge dog, pulling at separate ends of a chain. All she could hear was a shrill shrieking which came from the region of the hedge, accompanied by a shriller barking which proceeded from some other direction. But she had no time

to draw conclusions, for the little woman who had run against her said, in a sharp, staccato voice,

“Well met, my friend! Help me if you are a Christian!—Hold my dog!”

And a very rusty chain was forcibly pushed into Constance's hand, to the destruction of her neatly fitting glove, which immediately testified its objection by splitting from end to end.

“Don't let him go, for the life of you,” continued the excited little woman. “He's minded to swallow Mrs. Lee's prize pug—there, inside the gate,” pointing to the spot from which the perpetual yapping was coming. “My boy is in the ditch; I must pull him out. We bowled him over between us.”

After this Constance had a confused idea of seeing the woman rush away, and then of feeling herself forcibly dragged by a tugging at the end of the chain she held, towards the gate opposite—of herself struggling to pull in the other direction—of seeing the little woman, not far distant, stoop down over a wide ditch, lay hold of a booted leg which was sticking up from out of it, pull violently at the object, and extract with some difficulty a screaming bundle of mud-covered clothes. Then again there reached Constance's ear the quick voice of the woman calling back to her, “Mind, you don't let the dog go now. He'll kill that pug, sure as fate. He always threatened to do it. Mrs. Lee will bring an action for damages against me—Can't pay—Boy's

awfully hurt—Must look after him—You mind the dog, there's a good creature."

All the time the woman was speaking she had been trying to wipe some of the mud off the child's face; sitting on the ground with him in her lap, utterly regardless of the dirt in which he was smothered from head to foot.

There was quiet at last for the bewildered Constance, still holding manfully on to the huge mastiff, who silently strangled himself in his collar by unavailing efforts to reach the offending pug. Presently, however, he wisely changed his mind, and, turning, looked at the woman and child, making up his mind at last that, something being wrong with them, he had better resign the pug for a future occasion and go to the aid of his mistress. So, with a bound, he galloped off to where she was sitting, dragging Constance after him at a pace she had not moved at for many a day, drawing up just behind the two, and waiting patiently for orders. But no one noticed him, except Constance, and he calmly ignored her existence. His mistress was absorbed in her efforts to clean the child, and Constance watched them with great interest.

He was a brave lad, evidently, and, now that he had recovered from his fright, kept on repeating,

"I'm not much hurt, mother mine; it's only my ankle, and I can't walk home."

"You are not too heavy for mother to carry, Ray—not yet," the woman answered, trying to be cheerful.

"No, but what shall you do, little mother—you'll be so tired?" persisted the boy, thinking not a bit of himself.

He was no great burden, Constance thought—a boy of perhaps ten years old, just two sizes bigger than Violet—Violet who took every tender care as a right, and never thought about being a burden to anyone—Violet who would have allowed Constance to carry her till she fell under the weight, and then have asked, probably, "why she didn't go on, because Violet liked to be carried." But then Constance knew that she had made herself Violet's slave, whilst the boy before her was as certainly his mother's.

They were poor people, evidently, and ill-clad, yet there was something about them which did not give the on-looker a notion that they were persons of the lower class or uneducated. On the contrary, extraordinary as the woman was in manner and speech, her gentle blood seemed somehow to discover itself to Constance's judgment.

"But you mustn't carry me! I'll try to hop!" the boy continued.

"Don't talk *bosh*, my son. You are not half as heavy as Leo, and you know that only last month I carried him nearly half a mile when he had a fit. His legs *were* rather in the

way, certainly, but then there were four of them dangling. You have only two, you know. His poor paralysed body seemed to be all out of joint, so I had nothing to hold on to. But I managed it, for all that."

They laughed together over the joke, and Leo, joining in with a short bark, caused the woman to look over her shoulder at her two neglected friends, waiting so patiently behind her.

"If I hadn't quite forgotton you and Leo!" she exclaimed, addressing Constance; "You've fallen in for a nice job, it strikes me. But since you *are* in for it, you may as well carry it through with exemplary courage and Christian resignation. —Console yourself with the flattering unction that it will all redound to your credit some day."

"I will gladly help you in any way," Constance answered.

"All right! you're a *brick*. Which will you take charge of—the boy or the dog? You can have a choice of evils."

Constance looked at the muddy heap on the ground, and answered promptly, "I'll keep the dog."

"As you will; but don't be surprised if he pushes you into the ditch, as he did Ray; it's a favourite amusement of his. And remember, if he sets his affections on that pug again, you are not to let him go, if you die for it. He'd be the ruin of me. Mrs. Lee (pug's devoted mistress) hates me like the very devil, and she would be delighted to bring an action against me for the

(imaginary) value of her prize pug. She knows what she's about, too, for she has given me proper warning, would have everyone on her side into the bargain. Not that she'd recover the cost of her dear devoured for all that. One can't squeeze blood out of a stone, you know, or money out of paupers. Only there'd be a row—and Annas hates a row."

"You mean your husband?" Constance hazarded, struck by the name.

"Of course—But I see you don't know me; *ergo*, you are not a Ray-Hiltonite,—We pity your ignorance!! Ten out of every fifteen good souls you meet would be able to tell you everything about me. But as there is no one here to do it, I'll introduce myself. I am Mrs. Annas Holt, wife of a poor but respectable artist, who has more brains than pence, and more pride than common sense. The remarkable consequence of all this being that we can't exactly be called *thriving*, you know." She laughed a gay, almost childish laugh, and tossed her curly head like a little Exmoor pony. Constance laughed too; there was something so essentially droll about the little woman.

"Now then," she said, not allowing time for any answer to her last remarks, "give us a hand up," holding out a very muddy, but, as Constance noticed, very small and well shapen hand. "So—thanks—oh stop! You've not done yet. You poor victim! Just hoist the boy up on my back, will you? I'll hold

the dog." She took the chain from Constance's hand, who, despite her costly costume of pale fawn-coloured cashmere, felt bound to help the poor suffering little fellow; so lifted him, dirt and all, upon his mother's shoulders, and for payment received two black smears down the front of her dress. But she was glad to do them a service, and they had not noticed the misfortune, which was, she thought, a consolation, as it would probably have caused Mrs. Holt needless embarrassment.

"You are a good Samaritan," said the little woman, trotting on merrily with her burden. "Follow us at your leisure; we've only about half a mile to go, straight down this lane. I'll run on, deposit Ray, and come back for Leo. No one else can get him past Morris's farmyard. There's a favourite cat there, on whose life Leo is bent. Don't hurry." And off she trotted as fast as a strong little pony, whilst Constance had the amusement of looking at her.

A pretty little woman enough—but oh! so quaint—and still more quaintly dressed. She was a sort of apology for a boy—Short curly brown hair, cropped close to her head, a perfectly plain cloth dress reaching only to the top of her boot—and those boots!—regular "clumpers," such as a schoolboy would wear. A figure, perfect in symmetry, but below the average height, with a waist which nature, and certainly not corsets, had given her. There was something charming, too, about the freshness and

brightness of her general bearing, but her extreme peculiarity of person and manner had at first so astonished Constance that she only in this moment discovered anything to admire in Mrs. Holt.

Leo walked along quietly, in obedience to the orders his mistress had given him at parting, and (since puss never greeted him) passed the farmyard. As Mrs. Holt did not return to them, Constance went on to the end of the lane.

Here, buried like a bird's nest among the trees, was a cottage, which seemed built, nest-like, of tangled boughs and stems. Nowhere, from chimney-top to doorstep, could a brick or a stone be seen—nothing but flowering creepers looking in at every window, climbing up every chimney, and obtruding themselves even in at the doorway. Constance had never seen a house so absolutely covered. Nature seemed to have taken a cloth, bright-coloured and jewel-bespangled, and thrown it over the whole building till it fell down to the ground, and lay there trailing. A tiny dwelling place, with latticed windows, which the creepers just permitted, after much persuasion, to find breathing space amongst them ; and nothing else to be seen but leaves and flowers.

There was a large grass plot in front of the house, and even here the trees seemed fighting for standing room, with their boughs locked in one another. "The inhabitants must feel

like babes in the wood," was Constance's impression, "and no scarcity of damp leaves to cover them in the winter, I should say." But it was summer now, and the wild beauty of the place had a charm for her artist eye. It seemed to her like some dream-world of poetic peace—the peace which Nature breathes, and which the presence of man destroys.

Constance stood at the gate, looking upon it as upon some suggestive picture. Under one of the trees lay a man, powerless now to destroy the peace, because sleeping. He was stretched full length upon the grass, arms and legs outspread like four lank sails of a windmill at rest, his face upturned, open-mouthed, and generally idiotic in expression. Nevertheless, there was something in the face which made Constance look at it, wonder about it, and look again—more earnestly at each survey.

A care-worn face—pale, with sunken cheeks, and great black circles round the shut eyes. Was it the mouth which seemed to her so tender, so expressive of some unusual sentiment? Yes, that, and the long white hands lying spread out on the ground.—Who will hold that there is no expression in a hand? Surely none who have studied its varieties of form and movement.—For the rest, the sleeper had brownish hair on head and lip, and a brownish skin, nowhere relieved by even a tinge of colour.

Leo was growing impatient; he did not find looking at his sleeping master so entertaining an occupation as did Constance

Grant, who, to his thinking, was exerting a most unnecessary amount of force to hold him to her side, when, after all, it was only his native politeness which caused him to remain there, or obedience to the orders of his absent mistress. His good sense taught him that she must indeed be in some overwhelming distress to have palmed him off upon such a very ignorant stranger. But even a dog's patience can be exhausted by over pressure, and at last Leo, grown desperate, lifted up his voice and wept, in one dismal howl of protest.

It had the desired effect; the man started to his feet, looked stupidly up into the sky, then down upon the grass, with the vacant stare of sleepy idiocy. Then he made a violent rush forwards, and—by that time was awake. Leo howled again, and Annas Holt came to the rescue. Constance, only too glad to be rid of the dog, unceremoniously forced its chain into the owner's hand and launched into the clearest explanation possible to her of what had passed.

"I'm so glad," she said, "that you have relieved me of this incubus," while she pulled off her torn glove and tossed it away over the hedge, smiling good-humouredly.

Annas Holt seemed unable to do anything but stare at her, transfixed by her uncommon type of beauty; the dog stared at him, and Constance, noticing the man's confusion, hastened to enlighten him.

"You are wondering what brought us here, I see. Well, Mrs. Holt asked me to lead the dog for her—only he led me instead, and brought me here. The little boy sprained his ankle, and could not walk home. She carried him, and I held on to the dog, who behaved pretty well, considering. Didn't you, old fellow?"

She patted Leo condescendingly, and was simply *cut* for her pains, since the dog refused even to acknowledge her salutation, persistently turning his tail towards her.

"I beg your pardon," Annas Holt said, stupidly; "but who has sprained his ankle?" What he thought being, "How I should like to paint her!"

"Your son, I suppose it is; Ray, his mother called him. A brave lad; all he thought of was how it might tire her to carry him home after the accident."

"Where are they?" anxiously. "Is he much hurt?"

"I should think not, but please go and see for yourself. I will say good-bye now, or rather *au revoir*, for I shall call again to inquire how my little friend is, after a night's rest. He struck me as being more frightened than hurt. Do go to him, if you are anxious."

"Oh! no, it doesn't matter," dreamily; "men are always in the way where children are concerned."

Annas Holt twirled the dog's ear round his finger and stared

at the swallows fly-catching above his head. He had wonderful eyes, sentimental as the expression of his mouth; only the sentiment here was one of an unsatisfied longing—a soul-thirst after some Tantalus cup which might be ever and again snatched away from his lips, till, parched and fevered, they too seemed to tremble with the heart-sick nervousness of a hope deferred. All this Constance read, and more also, in the first moment that he stood before her. But she hoped he would leave her now and go to look after the child; it was not so, however; he stood there still, waiting for her to speak,

“You are Mr. Annas Holt, the artist, if I mistake not?” she said, interrogatively.

“Annas Holt, yes; but *not* an artist.”

“You paint, I hear?”

“Paint? Oh! I beg your pardon—yes, I paint. I misunderstood.”

“Then why deny your profession?”

“Profession! I may profess from now till the end of my days (not over long that, either), but it would not give me a title to be called an artist.”

“How so?”

“I take an artist to be one of a certain body of men whom the world acknowledges as having some especial standing place in its field and some especial claim to its esteem.”

"Indeed! I don't understand *you* now. What would you imply?"

"Simply this. I am *not* an artist, because a certain brotherhood has never opened its arms to bid me embrace it. I have not been asked to share its profits or its vices, its shame or its success."

"And why have you not?"

"The thing is soon told. I have no friends rich enough to buy my pictures at fictitious prices, or interested enough in my career to make me the fashion by crying me up at their dinner tables as a rising genius."

"But why are you so friendless? Surely, art, if true, is mighty, and will proclaim itself by the power of its own perfection."

"In Rome it might do so still, in Florence—or even in London—provided, of course, I were the illegitimate son of my Lord Tom Noddy, B.A., or a favoured lover of the Princess Favorita. But no; I am only Annas Holt of Ray-Hilton. My father worked the blacksmith's forge on the high road to Stretting, and I made a runaway match with the doctor's only daughter. Sins unpardonable, both of them, and materially affecting the worth of my pictures in the eyes of our art world here in Ray-Hilton. They will have none o' me."

Annas Holt laughed—the short nervous laugh of a mind ill at

ease. He led the way to a seat while he was speaking, and Constance followed him. They had already sailed away from the commonplaces of a conventional strangers' meeting and were drifting on to the sometimes dangerous coral reefs of confidences.

"You are at least honest," she said, with her eyes resting full upon his face, all suspicion of boldness taken from them by the shade of the long black lashes, which left him in doubt whether the colour of the iris were blue, or grey, or black. "I will follow your example," she continued; "I, too, have no ancestor's name for Ray-Hilton to handle tenderly, and no friends (here) to set forth my moral virtues!!"—laughing. "But I have what compensates (so we are told) for everything—money. I could buy you a name in three months and fame in as many years. But I will not—I——"

"Your pardon—I have not asked for your patronage," he said, with the pride of one who has a right to hold his own honour dear—even in Ray-Hilton.

"Forgive me if I hurt your feelings."

She held out her hand to him, pleading for his pardon. With true womanly sympathy she felt that her words had pained him, and although she was generally somewhat unmindful of the sharp points and irritating prickles of her speech upon the thin skins of men well favoured in the world's esteem she was always merciful to the suffering or the sinned against amongst mankind.

He laid his hand in hers, and it seemed to him in that moment as if he gave her the right to set her foot upon his pride or to do with him as she would. Even granting himself in her power, he fancied she might deal more gently with him than other people had done. He spoke again—but very sadly now.

“Go on with what you were saying. After all, I *should* probably accept any help you can offer me. We peasant-born must trample under foot all natural pride, bow our necks to the yoke of servitude, and lick the hand which, out of its Christian charity, offers us a feed of corn.” Then, seeing the pained expression of her face, “I don’t mean to say that in this spirit you would feed me. There is something nobler in your face.—Tell me what to do for the good of my half-starved artist desires; and raise my trodden-down hopes.”

“We must know each other better first; I must find out your capabilities, and you my honesty of purpose; afterwards we can ask help one from the other.”

“I think I know you. Is it not Mrs. Owen Grant whom I address?” stiffly.

“Yes. Of course you have heard of me. Ray-Hilton has amused itself for the last six months by playing at battledore and shuttlecock with my name. They have done their best to find out how it will stand banging about—but I’ve not heard with what result.”

"You must be far enough out of their reach."

"I hope so. But let us leave myself for discussion at some future time. Tell me, does your whole soul lie in your art? Is it your life, your hope, your very god?"

"It was once, but baser desires are fast growing up within me. I say now, 'Let us eat and drink, for to-morrow we die.' " He laughed again, and plucked nervously at a bough of a rhododendron bush which grew near, scattering the torn leaves dreamily around him.

"You must show me your pictures."

"Oh, yes! if you will."

"And believe me a friend still if I tell you the truth about them, such as it seems to me."

"I would rather honest blame than dishonest praise. That has been my portion hitherto."

"But how can you know it was dishonest praise?"

"By the result. 'Wonderful pictures!' they say, with smiling eyes and lying lips. 'Really marvellous! so much power, so poetical.' 'Will you take them?' I ask, 'and set them up for public judgment? Will you give them a place among your nation's treasures?' They answer me with another lie—but my pictures are never seen, never bought—and we are starving. Often, for my wife and child's sake, I would have stooped to pick up the crumbs which fell from the rich man's table. It was only her brave

spirit held me back. Poor little woman! the most foolish act she ever committed was marrying me—and mine in taking her. It is so much easier to starve alone.”

“And so much easier to *fight* when we have others for whose sake to lift the sword and brave the fatigues of a long siege,” she answered, cheerfully. “It is England’s wives and England’s children who make her soldiers brave. We are proud of our men; let them *deserve* our esteem, Annas Holt.

In the world’s broad field of battle,
In the bivouac of life,
Be not like dumb driven cattle,
Be a hero in the strife.”

“Granted; but suppose there be no strife, only a slow decay from hour to hour and from day to day—an almost imperceptible decline of hope and life?”

“Such a state need never be. Man’s will is strong, his power over circumstances irresistible; he can mould even adverse ones to his own ultimate good. I have seen it done, believe me.”

“Possibly; but that man must have been endowed by nature with nerve-strength and the power of physical endurance. I have neither one nor the other as a basis upon which to work. Nature has cursed me with a sickly constitution and an utter lack of nerve-force—see how my hand shakes.” He held up his long, thin arm, and showed fingers which looked almost transparent and trembled pitifully. “The doctors doomed me

to death before I was twenty ; that's more than ten years ago, and—well, I am talking to you of—a future.”

“You are ill, I see,” she said, very tenderly ; “I had not noticed it before.”

But she wondered how she had failed to do so ; for now, looking into his sunken eyes and hollow cheeks, she could trace the blight of constitutional disease upon them. But the charm they had for her seemed only increased. What if it should lie in her power to place this poor drooping plant out in the sunshine at last, where men could gather around it and admire all its beauties, if only for a few short hours ? Afterwards it might fade away quietly ; but then, its scented petals would be lying scattered all around and about it. Men could pick them up and store them away amongst the treasured things of their life. “And so the artist will reach the heaven of his desires,” she said. There was nothing impossible in the realisation of this dream for her who had all things at her command.

But the charm of imagining was broken in upon just then by a sharp voice, which called from one of the windows of the house,

“Annas, come here, I want you—the boy has fainted—come quickly.”

And in a moment he had started up and was striding excitedly over the grass towards the house. Another moment, and the door had shut behind him. She was alone, and ought to be

returning home; for Violet, little imperious Violet, would be demanding her supper. It was almost the first time Constance had left the child waking, and she expected to be called to account for the neglect. But a scolding had been well earned, since she had become acquainted with Annas Holt and found a kindred spirit, even in Ray-Hilton.

Arrived at her own home, Constance Grant was surprised to find on her table the visiting cards of Mrs. Clifford Clifford, wife of Clifford Clifford, Esq., Q.C., J.P., M.P., and most of the other letters of the alphabet in various combinations.

Now these celebrities considered themselves the "first" family in Ray-Hilton. They, at least, could never be accused of following the lead of Lady Challice, or any other Lady or Lord either, so they flattered themselves. It was the poor titles which must fall down before their wealth and talent. Clifford Clifford, Esq., had published several "celebrated" works on "Foreign Politics as opposed to British," "American Statesmanship," and other abstruse subjects; while his wife had presented the world with a fashionable novel in three ponderous volumes—for the publication and printing of which her banking account had materially diminished—consequently, they were persons of "note" and the Ray-Hilton "lions."

It would not, of course, "do" to allow Lady Challice to take the important lead of calling first upon a new comer. Accord-

ingly, everyone looked upon it as a spontaneous idea emanating from the head of the Clifford Clifford family when she announced at her crowded reception that day,

“Really, now, I see no sufficient reason for *not* calling upon poor Mrs. Grant, of the Abbey. She *looks* quite a gentlewoman, and is reported to have most cultivated tastes. I happen to have heard a great deal about her lately from a source I am not at liberty to name (a fertile imagination), and it is *most* satisfactory. Accordingly, I have determined to take the initiative, and call upon her, leaving my friends to follow or not as they will. In short, my carriage is ordered for five o’clock when I intend to carry out this well-meditated purpose of showing some kindness to a stranger.”

The friends, sipping their tea, commented upon the boldness of this step, some seconding, some opposing, but not one of them guessing that only half an hour before their arrival Clementina (Mrs. Clifford’s maid) had been telling her mistress the news with which all Ray-Hilton was ringing: the exciting announcement that “Her ladyship’s carriage had been seen this very afternoon to drive in at the gates of Hilton Abbey, to stop there over ‘alf an hour, and then to come out again, and show all Ray-Hilton that her ladyship had been a-visiting of Mrs. Grant, in *per-son-er proper-er*,” said the highly educated “young lady” of the *salon* below stairs.



CHAPTER VI.

ANNAS HOLT'S house was called the Ford Cottage. It stood upon the Glenlitho estate, and was, in fact, a part of it. To the right of the cottage lay the old deer park, stretching away to a fine trout river, which divided it from the wood-crowned hills. A wild, rocky-bedded, tortuously winding stream, rushing through the woods here, peacefully gliding through meadow swards there, and losing itself at last among the far-off hills. To the left of the cottage were the Glenlitho preserves, upon which thousands a year were spent, that some dozen of intellectual men might, once a year at least, have the gratification of seeing some hundreds of confiding pheasants lying slaughtered at their feet. And at the back of the Ford Cottage, away on a hill top, stood the Glenlitho dwelling-house; a picturesque gabled mansion of the Elizabethan architectural era, a huge rambling place, only half inhabited, and utterly neglected. Of course there was a ghost story belonging to it, for its owner was a semi-idiotic old

miser, who never left his room, and would have no person except a deformed housekeeper to wait upon him.

Sometimes indeed there came another occupant to the house. One who made noise enough for ten—one who by his extravagance in horses and dogs, not to mention fly-rods and guns, set all his father's old nerves quivering, his old head shaking, and his poor old irritable temper boiling over day and night.

This obnoxious personage was his only son—he who must needs inherit the land, if all else were left away from him—he who ought to comfort, yet only disturbed the old man's last years of a life so sweet to him still, because of all the good things he possessed in it. Yes, Tom Major, more generally known as The Ursa Major, would insist upon "filling up" the paternal halls with, not himself alone, but "Seven other devils more wicked than himself," said the despairing father, groaning upstairs in his room at the midnight saturnalia below.

The Ursa Major looked his name. A huge, rough, awkward creature, hairy-faced and loud-voiced. "A handsome man, though," some people said, whose tastes had been cultivated to rejoice over the splendidly ugly heroes of modern romance—people who admired a fine show of sandy hair on the face, fine large black eyes, and a general ponderousness of frame. Accordingly, Tom Major was said to show well in the hunting field, but to be generally obtrusive elsewhere.

Naturally, Ray-Hilton did not hold him in much esteem; nevertheless, there were not a few mothers whose eyes rested lovingly on the broad acres of Glenlitho, and who had made an effort to civilise Tom Major by inviting him to lawn tennis matches, picnics, at-homes, and balls. But he remained obdurate; hated society, and would have none of their polite attentions. Consequently he was “a bear!”—“a boor!”—“a beast!” according to the disposition of his accuser. And of Ray-Hilton he spoke thus to his own particular set.

“Beastly hole!—only one woman in the place worth a brass farthing, and that’s little Mrs. Holt. She’s a stunner, if you like. No humbug about *her*. A fellow can make a chum of her; none of that bosh about falling in love—married, you know, and all the nonsense rubbed out of her—Regular brick she is. See her on a horse, just! By Jove! she’s part and parcel of the beast. Back her to break in the worst-tempered brute out in a month. Awfully sharp too—don’t let one grow too conceited, you know. If it wasn’t for her, Ray-Hilton would be simply unbearable out of shooting season, but she keeps one awake, by Jove!”

And this is how Thomas Major talked of the wife of his tenant at The Ford Cottage, whilst day after day he sought her society. Hunting, driving, fishing—yes, and even shooting!—Lisa Holt was his frequent companion; till at last Ray-Hilton took them in

hand, and interested itself in their doings, even as in those of the young widow at Hilton Abbey.

It was the morning following Constance Grant's first visit to Annas Holt. Breakfast had been finished a long time, and he was settling down to paint in the little outhouse which had been turned into a studio. The light was so cleverly arranged that it made no bad painting room, for all the abuse Annas Holt lavished upon it in his moods of desponding discontent.

It was a striking subject standing nearly finished on the canvas before him, and strikingly handled; with a purity and simplicity which has only been reached by one modern painter—Ary Scheffer alone can place a human figure upon his canvas unsupported by any surroundings, unembellished by any background, and, through the mere force of expression, put such soul into that figure that it shall tell you the whole story of its life—its sins or its purity, its strength or its weakness.

Towards such simplicity Annas Holt aimed, and indeed much of it lay in his own nature. All the poetry was there, and the soul; and for the mechanical part—Annas Holt had studied for many years under a favourite Italian master, whose pupils had almost all attained to celebrity.

The subject on the canvas was one which many men have tried to handle—how few successfully! Only Pygmalion's marble statue after it had become a woman—only the wonder and

doubt and infantine simplicity of a being strange to all the sentiments of life—a nature keen to enjoy, yet sleeping still in the innocence of ignorance and the calm of unawakened passions. The only objects in the picture were a pedestal, a marble floor, and a long stream of moonlight lying across the spot whereon the statue had been graven. As yet the work was incomplete, and Annas Holt had little more hope of its success than for that of all the other wretched children of his brain lying crowded together, forgotten, in an attic.

He was idly looking at the picture and falling into a reverie, brush and palette ready for work, yet not one touch laid on, when his wife came into the room. She was dressed in a very short and very spare riding habit, with a plain felt hat of the class wideawake, a man's whip, and coarse dogskin gloves. She was neat to a degree, but by no means fashionably or even becomingly "got up."

"I just came to tell you that I shan't be in before dinner, Annas," she said, slashing her boots. "Lessons are over, and I'm off to take a little refreshment. One needs it, I can tell you, after forcibly dragging Master Ray through his Cæsar and painfully goading him over the Pons Asinorum. But '*See, the conquering hero comes,*'" she sang, merrily. "The Ursa wants a horse brought in proper training for a town cousin of his who is coming down next week. A park swell!—Poor brute! Well, I

hope I shall have the pleasure of witnessing his departure on Spitfire—Just picture a Londoner on that beast!—How long will he stay there?—It's his own, too; he has sent it to Glenlitho to be taken care of and broken in for next season. The care I'll answer for—but the breaking!" she laughed with a child's perfect freedom. "The breaking will be corporal, if anything. I'm doing my best, but Spitfire is not blessed with an amiable disposition." Then, changing her tone to one of affectionate inquiry, "You don't want me at home, do you, old man?"

"Oh! no," wearily.

"But you speak doubtfully—The ride's not of the least consequence, you know; it will bear postponing *sine die* if need be. Is there anything else to be done?"

"No; I was only wondering *how* you can manage to go out and enjoy yourself, forgetting all your home troubles, as a child forgets. You know that our last half sovereign was paid away yesterday, you know that the boy must make his dinner off vegetables to-morrow, and yet you can tear across country on a wild brute of a horse and laugh your troubles to scorn—How I envy your disposition!"

"And would it mend those troubles to mope at home, think you?" laying her hands lovingly on his shoulders. "If so, I will off with hat and spur, sit me down by your side, and together we'll howl all day, and all night too, if need be." A pause,

Then, earnestly, "No, no, old man; I *can* go out, I *can* forget. And I can come back to you with a light heart and a good digestion for coarse food. After which I can, not only *preach* cheerfulness, but *practise* it too; example being at all times better than precept. Beyond this, I preserve my health, keep my liver in order, lest it should incline to the green and yellow melancholy of surplus bile; and so I keep my poor brain clear for the dissecting of those classics and mathematics which our young hopeful demands at my hands. They're no joke, I can tell you, for a woman.—Now I'm off." She kissed him on the forehead. "Shall be home before one o'clock, I hope; if not, don't wait dinner."

"Dinner! Of what does dinner consist—of what will it consist to-morrow?"

"Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof, my beloved. For the moment we are provided sumptuously."

"How so, when only yesterday you said there was nothing in the house?"

"Well, you see, I was driven to do a little poaching on my own account. I purloined one of Mr. Ursa Major's rabbits, before breakfast!!! Behold the practical good of being a sportsman!" laughing gaily.

"But you had no right; the law would punish a wretched labourer for that same act."

"Of course, and it may punish me too if it catches me, but I don't fancy friend Ursa will put the screw on. He's making use of me just now. I might even shoot one of next season's pheasants with impunity."

"That does not make it right, Lisa; or would not in my eyes at least."

"No; it's quite wrong—*quite*; but it's a greater wrong that Ray and I should have no dinner after all our hard work. Now, tell me—could I be expected to expend my energies and waste my muscular tissue to oblige Ursa Major, Esquire, without the anticipation of a good dinner to supply the loss? Indeed, no; besides.—She paused for a moment, and then, with a serio-comic mockery of one profoundly philosophising, continued.—Besides, sir, have you not heard what the immortal Dr. Brewer tells us? '*A lamp will not go out so long as it is supplied with fresh oil; neither will the body be consumed so long as it is supplied with sufficient food to keep alight the capillary fires, &c.*' Take it to heart, my dear Annas. I cannot afford to *go out* at any price—Not yet, at least; not—oh, certainly not before I have helped Ray through the lemma at least—Perhaps you don't know what the lemma is, my beloved?" she asked, playfully, bending over him from behind and turning up his face with both her little brown hands. "You artists are so superbly ignorant. You have a mind above magnitudes?"

"Well, Lisa," more cheerfully. "I know it has something to do with Euclid, but as Euclid and I always had a natural enmity one against the other, it is not likely that I worry myself about him."

"I've a good mind to give you as many kisses as there are books before we come to the lemma, by way of enlightenment!—only I fancy your temper wouldn't quite stand it just now, and prudence is the better half of valour. Well, I'm off.—Let Ray come and sit with you for a time; he dearly loves seeing you paint. He's a born artist, whatever you may say."

"God forbid!" pushing the heavy hair off his forehead. "Let him rather earn bread by the sweat of his brow and forget that he has a mind."

"What! be a servant all his days. Thank you; *no*. Genius at least makes a man independent; he is no other man's slave."

"No; only the slave of all men and of all nations, if he would win their applause or be known to them. And if not known, what is the use of genius, wherein is its possessor better than his fellows—how greater?"

"Oh good heavens! you are soaring up into the clouds of metaphysics again. I can no more follow you there than you can follow that '*Similar polygons inscribed in circles are one to another, as—&c., &c., &c.*' Good bye, you poor victim!"

Her gay laugh rang behind her as she tore at racing speed

down the garden path and away towards the Glenlitho stables. Here she found Tom Major waiting for her ; redder, noisier, more awkward than usual, from irritation at her non-appearance for half an hour after the time she had appointed to be with him.

“ Beastly uncivil of you, to keep a fellow waiting, to say the least of it,” he grumbled ; lifting her into the saddle, and almost flinging her over the other side with the violence of his upward jerk.

“ Much more uncivil had I left my husband’s apple dumplings unmade, I’m sure,” she retorted. “ You’re not the only person in the world, please remember.—But Spitfire very sensibly objects to this style of conversation as decidedly frivolous. She is making up her mind not to stand still much longer—How slow you are. I’m off. Follow at your leisure ;” and she let her horse go, down the green ride and away into the park.

“ She’s a brick,” Tom Major said again, and sped away after her.





CHAPTER VII.

AND Annas Holt was left alone. He preferred it, in his present melancholy state of mind. "Poor little woman!" he thought; "it is lucky for her she has some amusements in her hard life and the capacity to enjoy them. It would be cruel indeed to show any objection to her only mode of taking pleasure; but I do object—every man objects to have his wife talked about—and I know Ray-Hilton well enough to be quite sure what they are saying. Had she *any* other source of relaxation, *any* other friend, anything else to relieve the drudgery of a life of miserable poverty, I would raise my voice against her being so much with young Major—I have only to object, and she will give it up"—Here he began painting again, dashing on the colours with an impetuosity detrimental to success. "God knows how good she is, how honest and true! How she provides for us is beyond me—it always seems that we are at the end of our resources; and yet, well—we have not starved!"

Suddenly, in the midst of his moralising, some substantial idea started into being, and immediately usurped the place of substanceless sentimentality. It nerved his hand, awoke his soul, and once more he was—an artist. The small became great and the great small, till Annas Holt, a blacksmith's son, rose nearer to immortality than all the Ray-Hilton lawgivers, pastors, or masters. So does the hand of Art stretched earthwards raise her children out of the dust, and lift them straightway to some heaven of its own wherein there is no inequality! Presently—as it seemed to the painter, but in truth an hour had passed by—the entrance bell rang, and he went out to open the door himself, Lisa not being at home; for Susan, in soiled gown and rumpled hair, was an eyesore to Annas Holt and his wife, so that it was forbidden her to appear about the house.

A carriage stood before the gate—strange event for the Ford Cottage—a miniature phaeton and tiny pair of greys scarcely larger than big dogs. These, again, were held by the tiniest pair of hands that ever grasped a rein; for little Violet, perched up on a seat by Constance's side, was playing coachman, with a mimic air of dignity delightful to look upon. Blue eyes beaming with young heart's mirth, golden curls glowing in the morning sunlight—a very type of that fairest dream, a perfectly sorrowless childhood.

But Annas Holt's eyes were not for Violet; she was fair

enough for any picture, but the subtler charm of womanhood lay not upon her, and the artist always *felt* more than he saw. Those things which spoke to his spirit moved him, not those which his eyes beheld; therefore it was at the woman he gazed in ever-renewed admiration. Constance gave the reins to the page and bade him allow Miss Violet to drive home, which caused a shriek of delight from the child, who fancied that the whole responsibility would now lie in her own hands, and gloried in the importance it gave her.

Constance's greeting was commonplace enough, yet she did not shake hands as strangers do, but only said, getting out of her carriage,

"I have kept my promise, you see, Mr. Holt; Violet drove me over in her own little trap. Who is honoured, she or I?"

At which an indignant little voice answered for her:

"Oh! now, you naughty Constance, you know you like it better than anything in all the world, 'cept me!—Where's the brave boy who didn't like his mother to carry him home when he hurted his foot? I call him rather stupid, tho'—but p'raps mothers aren't nice, like Constances."

"Where is your son?" Mrs. Grant asked, addressing Annas Holt; "I promised Violet that she should take him for a drive." Then, seeing him hesitate, she said in an aside, so that Violet's delusion should not be dispelled, "He'll be quite safe;

she isn't going to drive ; quiet as her ponies are, we should not risk that. Tom will look after her and them." Then aloud, "Violet would so much like company ; she has no young friends ; it would be quite a novelty."

"Don't think I'll have him now," the child said, with the changeability of her age and sex. "Don't like boys. Get up Tom," to the page ; "I'm quite tired of sticking about here."

"Very well, as you like," Constance answered, humouring her as usual in small matters. And so they drove away.

"I want her to be good friends with your boy," Constance said, as she and the artist sat down upon the seat under the drooping ash, where they had parted yesterday ; "but if I appear to force him upon her, she will resent the interference and dispose her contrary little mind to dislike him ; children *are* so perverse."

"Are they ? Well, I have not much experience of them. Ray is the only child I know, and so far from being perverse, his whole aim in life seems to be to forestall his mother's wishes.—He doesn't like me.—He only likes my pictures."

"What *do* you mean ?" in the greatest surprise.

"I mean that I have given him as a birthright my artist nature ; his sympathies would be all with me if I had encouraged them. Instead, I check them, chill them, throw them back upon himself—Poor child ! how can he love me ?"

"But surely you are wrong ?"

“Would you have me encourage him? Shall I say to him, My son, build up your temple, garnish it with the purest imaginings of your soul, lavish upon it the work of your brain and hand; say to yourself confidently the day is coming in which men shall tell me it is well? Shall I see him throw open the doors of this temple in all the pride of his young ardour, inviting the passers-by to enter and see what of a man’s power stands revealed within? Then shall I listen to his cry of anguish as one man after another puts his head round the corner of the door, out of mere curiosity, and remarking, ‘Ah! very nice,’ turns away, nor ever visits it again? Shall I see my son raise his own hand to tear down stone by stone the temple he had built with all his life’s best materials, and then lie down amongst the ruins, there to die and rot unknown? For this is what I must see if I put the brush into his hand and say to him, Child, your nature and mine are one; come and see what I can show you. God forbid! No, I will *not* teach him my art; he shall *not* understand me—and so he will not love me.”

“I don’t realise the necessity of this disappointment. Your boy is strong of constitution; he can go out and do battle with the world. Why should *he* not achieve what *you* have failed to reach? Show him the mark at which you have aimed, and let *him* lay the prize at your feet. Surely you could rejoice in his success?”

"Say, rather, I shall not live to see his failure, as being the only piece of consolation you could offer me.—But enough of this subject."

And then, after a short pause, he rose from the seat and stood in front of Constance with his old melancholy calmness of bearing. "You came to see my pictures, Mrs. Grant," he said, formally; "if you will follow me, they shall be submitted to your kindly judgment."

"You speak as if I were a customer visiting them with a view to purchase—perhaps you wish it might be so, but—well, I could not buy from you."

"Or, more probably, you will not think them worth a price."

"Which remains to be proved," she answered, laughing; and, rising from her seat, followed him as he turned towards the house. Together they walked across the tree-covered lawn, not speaking, but each thinking strange thoughts of his and her own fashioning. The silence was still unbroken as they passed into his studio and shut the door upon the outside world, which to him was a world of pain and hunger and Tantalus-like thirst—thirst for the waters of fame, which reached even to Annas Holt's head, but ever and again sank away from his lips, till in their feverish delirium they cursed the very draught for which they longed, and tried to believe it would only prove bitterer than the pain of longing.

But her presence was even now exerting a wholesome influence over him. A great deal of his melancholy passed off, and he showed her his pictures with a manly pride in the power of which he *felt* himself possessed. There was not a vestige of conceit in the man—so pitiful a sentiment rarely stands side by side with real genius—but pride in a great work because of its greatness, acknowledged or unacknowledged, was his, for he deemed himself worthy of his calling.

He laid before her with equal candour finished works, strong in the strength of their own greatness; unfinished pieces, abandoned for their weakness; idle fancies, passing thoughts, caught as they flitted across his brain and given form and making, that they might live or die hereafter as he should will it. A ray of colour, a shadow, a line; nothing more, very often—except the atmosphere of genius which lay about them. A little child, a dog, a flower; nothing greater—save the soul which glorified them. But Constance Grant stood there silent, astonished beyond all astonishment which she had ever before experienced.

Not of this kind were the pictures she had expected to see; not in one point did her fondest hopes touch upon the reality. Why, this man held in his hand the power to lay a world at his feet! and alas! he had not the strength to wield it, or, having the strength, he lacked the courage—she had yet to find out which. But the work that stood almost finished on the easel pleased her best of

all—the statue which he had endowed with a life of his own conceiving and a purity of his own imagining. On this she looked the longest, returning to it again and again after glancing over the smaller sketches.

After Constance had seen everything, the least as well as the greatest of his works, she stood by his side, silent. She would not pain him by repeating words of praise which he had often heard and only learnt to scorn as a fool's paradise. Yet would she have him know that she, reared in the arms of art—she to whom the doors of every studio in Rome and Florence had been opened because she was deemed worthy to enter them—she could feel his greatness and acknowledge his power.

After thinking awhile how best to show him her appreciation in a manner he could not doubt, she, having read his nature aright, laid her hand upon his arm and said,

“Annas Holt, when you know me better, you will find out, without my telling you, the impression your works have left upon my mind. But a stranger to you, I am, nevertheless, on the excuse of my great love for art, going to ask a favour at your hands.”

“A favour! *You—of me—impossible!*”

“Yes, a favour—the greatest I have ever asked from any man—and I have a character for impudence, you must know.” This she said laughingly; then changing to the seriousness of pleadin-

throwing her whole soul into her voice, and laying her hand on the favourite picture,

“ Give me this.”

“ What do you mean ?” he asked, eagerly, for the waves of a vast joy were surging over his heart and brain.

“ I am only asking you for one of your pictures, because—well, because I have an unusual fancy for it. I generally gratify my whims if possible. Besides, I want a bond which must seal us friends—brothers if you will, since we are fellow-travellers on the same highway.”

Yes, he understood her now ! For very love of his work she had asked it as a gift from him. She had not offered to purchase—she had not dragged him down to the level of a trader in art—she had thought his picture worthy of her acceptance, himself worthy of being asked to bestow it upon her.

He was appreciated at last—not personally, perhaps, but what matter ? Was not his genius the only worthy part of him ? Let that live, and his poor sickly frame might cease to be, even in this very hour, if Nature willed it so.

“ Of course it is yours,” he said, trying to steady his voice.

“ Will you bring it to Hilton Abbey as soon as it has the few finishing touches put upon it, and with your own hands place it ? The dearest treasure I have is a Mignon, which Ary Scheffer painted for the man who stood to me in the place of a father.

Your picture shall be set face to face with it. By the bye, what have you called it?"

"*A Breath of Life.*"

"I like the name," she answered, simply.

He did not tell her that the honour was too great—he did not think so. If his were art at all, it was worthy of the highest honour; if not, as well cast it upon the dunghheap. He believed in its greatness; why should not she? He knew that flattery and humbug were things possible with women, but in her he never once suspected them; how could he, looking into the honest depths of her eyes and listening to the sympathetic tones of her voice? Truly, she had read him aright, and shown much wisdom in the reading.

"I will bring it," he said. "But have you remembered what I told you?"

"In which particular?"

"I am Annas Holt, the blacksmith's son."

"And I—a nobody's daughter—a waif picked up in the streets of Rome by a penniless artist who admired my baby face and the roundness of my baby limbs, and only wanted me for the Cupids, the Ganymedes, the angels of his pictures. As I grew older I was his Marguerites, his Juliets, his Madonnas. Oh! I assure you the people of Ray-Hilton are quite right not to visit me," laughing.

"But you are rich—very rich?" he questioned, in wonder at her story.

"Yes—*now*," she answered.

"How did you become so blessed?"

"The money was my husband's." She spoke rapidly, her face flushing all over, then paling to an unnatural whiteness.

"And he is——"

"Stop! please," she said, turning suddenly towards Annas Holt and laying her hand on his arm. "Never ask me about him. He loved me with a true honest love, and I—I—But indeed there is nothing romantic in the affair. Most people have done something foolish in their lives; many suffer for it always. But to return—a blacksmith for a father is just one social grade above none at all. So, according to your own line of argument, *I* must be honoured by *your* presence in my house. Good—let us shake hands in true democratic brotherhood with all nobodies."

It was impossible to withstand the influence of her bright manner—as impossible to him, at least, as to shrink from the first spring sun-gleam which might fall upon him after the long winter darkness. Annas Holt's weary face relaxed into a smile, and he answered, cheerfully,

"So be it; I will bring my gift, and with my own hands lay it on your altar."

Constance suddenly remembered something which she blamed herself for having forgotten so long.

"And your wife," she said, "must come with you; you will both lunch at Hilton Abbey. By the bye—is she one of us? an artist, I mean?"

"Not by so much as a thought."

"What is she, then?"

"Simply this—The truest wife, the fondest mother, the bravest woman in all Ray-Hilton."

"That I don't for a moment doubt; all decent women are in the eyes of their husbands. I should not have thought of asking for her moral qualities. What are her tastes—her pursuits?"

"Perhaps you will be prejudiced if I tell you. Why not discover for yourself?"

"Oh! there'll be enough country left for me to explore after you have pointed out the beaten tracks. Nobody ever yet gave a true sketch of another person; it is you who would be prejudiced. But please tell me about her; I like to have the dangerous places pointed out, for, do you know, I have an unfortunate way of stumbling upon them where women are concerned."

"Then Lisa is safe—She is as unlike the generality of women as it were possible to be."

"Don't say that," severely; "you mistake me if you fancy I

admire an unwomanly woman. It is not so. As Nature made us such we are, and if we try to alter her work we only make an incongruous muddle which is an eyesore to all mankind."

"Lisa is natural enough, but Nature has given her the tastes of a man; she has indulged them, and the education her pedantic old father gave her fostered them from the first. He made his daughter a great classic scholar, a very good mathematician, and she made herself a carpenter, a sportsman, and a tutor."

Constance laughed aloud. "Bravo! She is not, then, another feeble copy of some fashionable model. I long to know her. Is this the sum total of her attributes?"

Again mirth was catching. "Oh! no," gaily. "She can make an Irish stew out of nothing, and I challenge Ray-Hilton to beat her apple dumplings.—Now, suppose we come out in the garden?"

They left the studio and, once more crossing the lawn, came to a level gravel path at the end of the garden. Here they walked together up and down, talking as two old friends might talk of all those things which lay nearest their hearts. Pandora-like, they opened the closed casket of Annas Holt's life and, scattering all the evil things it contained to the four winds, left only Hope lying at the bottom—hope that for him night was far spent and the day drawing on apace.

He felt a new man under the influence of her sanguine spirit. But in a little time their talk drifted to common things, and she told him how that, after being so long ignored by the inhabitants of Ray-Hilton, she had at last been called upon by Lady Challice and the opposing faction.

"Not that I blame them," she said, in conclusion ; "if people's silk gowns are so easily soiled, and so hopelessly injured in the soiling, they do well to hold them up carefully out of the dirt."

"And are you going to accept this tardy hospitality ?"

"Well, you know, when one sees an open door one feels a desire to walk in out of sheer curiosity. How long one stays there is another question, depending on a thousand things. What say you ?"

"It lies in your own hands—you are rich, and can buy people's good opinion."

"Oh, surely not! *Buy* the toleration of your county families! Why, I had thought my money would be against me here."

"That depends upon how you use it. Make me the possessor of ten thousand per annum, and I will buy all Ray-Hilton in six months, blacksmith's son though I am. I know them and their affectations and their weaknesses."

"And I do not ; so I shall trust to you as my mentor."

"A poor creature, truly, but one who has lived for three-and-

thirty years in Ray-Hilton, alone perhaps, but not unobservant." A pause; then, dreamily, "Alone? No! why do I say alone? We have friends."

"Everyone has? Who are yours?"

"Those who, like ourselves, are poor and lying in the mud of social unworthiness. In the by lanes and far-off corners of our parish there are many such. They would die for Lisa, every man of them."

"No one would die for me, I think, or live for me either," Constance answered, sadly. "We who are so well favoured in the world's esteem, we who can crowd our ball-rooms and our dinner-tables from year to year, cannot boast much honest love as our portion, and even our friends are few."

"Not yours, surely."

"Yes, mine. Strange as it may seem to you, there is only one person in the world (except Violet) whom I love, and that person has no right to my affection. We women are so perverse, you see," forcing a laugh. "But I hear the ponies pegging up the lane; they are coming to fetch me, and my Lady Vi will not be kept waiting, so I must go. Come and see me safely off the premises."

He walked with her to the gate and out to the road where the tiny carriage had just drawn up, and Violet called out excitedly, seeing her,

"Where's that boy? I'll have him now."

"He's gone out, little one," Annas Holt answered.

"Is he, Constance?" questioned infant incredulity, pouting.

"If his father says so, why do you ask *me*?"

"'Cause *you* know, that's why."

"So does he, Vi."

"No, he doesn't—come along, I want my dinner. P'raps"
—graciously, to Annas Holt—"p'raps I'll come and fetch that
boy another day. Good bye, Mr. Holt—Constance can't wait,"
and a mimic hand was held out to complete this mimic greeting,
while the little curly head bowed with a mimic courtesy. 'But
it was all so gracefully done, with such perfect simplicity, yet
with such an arrogance of womanhood, that the artist laughed
aloud for the second time that day. Constance was in the
carriage now and, nodding him adieu, she took the reins, and
away they rattled.

The excitement was over, and Annas Holt felt weary even
with so little exertion. Mentally and physically exhausted, he
threw himself upon the grass to rest. A minute, and he was
sleeping as Constance had first seen him, stretched under the
shade of the drooping ash.





CHAPTER VIII.

WHEN Constance arrived at home she went up to her bedroom that she might lay aside her walking clothes. Violet had run away into the garden with her pet Persian kitten hugged to strangulation in the cruelly loving little arms ; so Constance was alone. Her footstep could not be heard on the stairs or across the passage, because of the soft Persian carpet on which she trod. The door of her room being open, she could not help noticing her maid, who was hastily shutting a drawer of the wardrobe—at which she had no right—a drawer, in which nothing of any importance was kept, either. Old letters, photographs, receipts, but nothing private or even pretty—nothing in any way calculated to excite female curiosity.

“Why do all servants love a voyage of discovery?” was Constance’s mental comment, as the maid, on seeing her, flew across to the other side of the room and tried to appear as if she had not time to think of such frivolity as opening drawers,

"I please, madame"—she always said madame with a French accent—"Lady Challice's servant gave me this for you. And a gentleman has called; he said he would walk and come back in half an hour." Dennis turned and recommenced putting the table in order; she never enlarged her conversations.

"Who is the gentleman?" Constance asked, and again there was that hard, cold intonation which on certain occasions was hers, whilst with elaborate carelessness she tossed hat and gloves upon the bed.

"I do not remember his name, madame, but it is the gentleman who was here last Wednesday."

"Mr. Aram?"

"I believe that is his name; I could not think of it for the moment."

Just then the door flew open with a bang, and Violet danced in on the tips of her toes—She was full of glee.

"Oh! Constance, come along down, Uncle Paul is here!! He wants you ever so much. Oh! do be quick, my darling dear!" and two strong little arms wrenched at the skirts of her dress, which, flying from its holdings with a crack, assumed a somewhat intoxicated appearance.

"Now, see what you have done, little impatience. I must change my dress. After that I have a letter to answer, so go

down, dear, and amuse Uncle Paul yourself. Tell him I can't come just yet." She spoke very wearily now, and sitting on the edge of her bed, opened the letter which Dennis had just given her.

"I shall not want you this morning," she said to the servant, who, answering "Thank you, madame," left her alone. The letter was as follows :

Dear Mrs. Grant—

Can you manage to dine with us on Saturday next, at seven o'clock? We have friends coming from London of the kind you will appreciate, some not unworthy representatives of the literary and scientific world, with a sprinkling of the artistic to light them up! Our neighbours of Ray-Hilton have no love for advanced opinions, consequently few, or, possibly, none of them, will be with us.

Our visitors are personal friends (we never give formal dinner parties), so you will know what to expect; and we shall not be at all hurt by a refusal should you not care to join such an unconventional party, being as yet a stranger to our country ways. On the other hand, if you can make up your mind to come, you will, I hope, find something in our circle to compensate you for being ruthlessly dragged from the quiet of your own arm chair.

Yours truly,

MARY CHALLICE.

Castlerock, June 10.

"What a gloriously unconventional letter!" Constance mentally exclaimed. "Who would have credited Ray-Hilton with so much originality? A new neighbour asked to dinner in the first person! and a confession that it's only a party of friends! Delightful! Here at least I shall not feel out of my element." So she went to the table and wrote an acceptance. Her letter was somewhat more formal than the invitation. She wrote in the

first person, indeed, but nothing beyond. Constance Grant was not a woman to rush headlong into intimacies, and, as to friendships, she made none.

Some fragments of a past hung about her still, and she cherished them fondly—so fondly that no new element had ever been allowed to invade their dwelling-place. Her present life was the absolutely passionless calm of exhaustion. Rest after the shipwreck, Peace after the struggle to breast surging waves—to swim—to live—aye, though she would fain have sunk quietly to her rest. But the sun shone still and the flowers bloomed, and the world was very fair. After all, the grave had not been her goal, and Constance knew now that there was work yet to do with mankind and for mankind.

The letter finished, she laid it aside and then changed her dress. But this afternoon she took no trouble over her toilet—a rare event with her, for well she knew the truth of the words, “Let never maiden think, however fair, she is not fairer in new clothes than old.” And, indeed, Tennyson shows a modern enlightenment of opinion which none of us dare criticise.

Constance Grant, at any rate, looked better in the lace-bordered, silk-girdled, softly-falling costume which she generally wore in the afternoon, than in the figurative *faded silk* of to-day. But she donned it, nevertheless. Then the lunch bell rang and

she was obliged to go down stairs. Violet exacted punctuality at meals, and Violet's voice was even now shrieking to her.

"I'm starved dead, oh ! do come down, Con, dear," and so on unceasingly, till Constance reached the last stair, and, sitting upon it, allowed the little tyrant to clamber into her arms, and be carried, infant-like, in to dinner.

Paul Aram was there, seated already on the chair set for him at the luncheon table, but turned round with his back to the table and facing her as she entered. She only said, "Good morning, Paul," nodding and smiling a welcome. But the smile was not her own—it was forced, and Paul Aram knew it. He did not care, for he knew more than this—He knew the story of her life.

He told her that Violet had been very good company, and related an anecdote of how the child had said to him just now, "Dennis says there are no good people in the world, Uncle Paul; but you are good, and Constance, aren't you ?" "The latter sentiment I echoed," he continued, turning to the table and beginning to carve the dish before him, for they were seated now, and Violet, heedless of being the heroine of a story, was loudly clamouring for "Uncle Paul's meat!!" "And the first statement," he continued, "goes far to prove the innocence of childhood. A pause, then, satirically, "It's well to boast one admirer, I suppose, deluded though she be ; only Mother Nature

has an objectionable way of wiping the film out of children's eyes just as one is confiding in their blindness.—Who is this Dennis, by the bye?"

"My new maid," laughing.

"The child hates her."

"Haven't you discovered that Violet is as full of caprices as—well—as I am. Dennis has very little to do with her, so they won't come to blows."

"Yes, they will, tho'," Violet chimed in, nodding her curly head decisively, "if she tries to kiss me again. More 'tatoes, please," pushing her plate towards Mrs. Grant.

Servants were not allowed to wait at lunch; it was Violet's dinner, and Violet insisted that Constance alone should serve her. If it happened that Constance were out at this particular meal the child always refused meat or drink from strange hands, especially servants, "'Cause," said she, "their hands are nasty, dirty, and they nasty my food." But in all things this child was dainty and whimsical, yet full of grace and natural childish beauty. In a lull of Violet's chatter Constance said, addressing Paul Aram,

"I want you to prepare the way for doing someone a service, Paul."

"Yes," eagerly.

"It does not affect myself."

"Who then," tersely.

"I have ferreted out an artist, even here, in Ray-Hilton ; a great genius, but friendless, poor, and of low birth."

"And you hope to make a silk purse out of a sow's ear? You're always dreaming, Constance!"

"Let me dream on, if it amuses me. You, at least, will have all the work to do. You must see his pictures, and write one of your cleverest criticisms upon them for our next issue of *The Epicurean*. Rouse public curiosity, you know, leaving it in ignorance for the present as to where or how this new artist exists. You understand better than I the way to make or mar a man, and Annas Holt is worthy of your best efforts. When the right time comes, I will stand forward as his supporter. My name will be enough, if you pave the way."

"Does he know it?"

"What? My name? No."

"Has anyone in Ray-Hilton discovered that when Constance Grant appears in her box the world lifts its opera glasses upon her and whispers, 'Loyella'?"

"Not yet; but Loyella's books are circulated in Stretting Library, I see, and it will probably not be long before some kind friend introduces me. I shall keep the secret as long as possible, it's so delightful to be quiet. In the meantime there is Annas Holt to be lifted out of the mire."

"A favourite amusement of yours. You will soil your fingers some day."

"That has been done often enough already. It all wipes off in time."

"Yes, because you can use a golden towel; we of the old flax duster don't find stains rub off so easily."

"Paul!" reproachfully; then, laughing, "Give Vi some more mutton to change your ideas.—You must stay here to-night and see Annas Holt to-morrow."

"Is he coming here?"

"I am going there instead."

"What for?"

"To see the progress of a picture he has given me."

"Another of the world's self-satisfied darlings, I perceive. Why do you ask my help for one so well able to push himself?"

"But if *I asked* for the picture," she said, very severely, looking straight into his eyes as she always looked into other men's, but rarely into his, "is he to blame?"

"I understand you—forgive me."

He spoke with an intense pained tenderness now—so intense that she shrank under it, but showed no sign.

"I see your own noble self as I have always seen you," he added.

"What a pity I can't appear in a new light, just for once,"

forcing a laugh. "But when one has a good character I suppose one may as well try to keep it. Don't mistake me, however; the picture was worthy of my admiration. I could not flatter such a man as Annas Holt; we only *flatter* those we think our inferiors. I have told you he is an artist."

"Of what school?"

"If any, the modern classic; but he is not strictly academic."

"Pre-Raphaelite?"

"Could you define your term?" sarcastically; then, laughing at her own severity, "Luckily, I have learnt to understand your art jargon, and can answer you. All truly classic art must be in some degree what you term Pre-Raphaelite. Annas Holt is no exception; but he does not exaggerate, as many of our artists do. —I have called them *artists* out of politeness, you see."

"They would thank their beloved 'Loyella' for her consideration. I sometimes wish they could know you as you are Constance. They don't object to being lashed through the medium of paper and print. Let them take a look at your eyes and your lips, and then see how much they enjoy your criticisms."

"I always tell the truth; but I am not the question now, thank Heaven! Will you stay and see Annas Holt?"

"To-morrow is publishing day—how can you ask me? What

time have I for art worshipping ? ” he spoke as if she had wronged him personally by the suggestion.

“Do you complain of having the means to live honestly,” she said, very gently, “after all you have gone through ? ”

An expression of deep pain passed over his features as, with contracted brow, he answered,

“Complain ! Good God ! have I the right ? What do you take me for ? Gratitude at least has not lost its meaning for me, though most other beautiful things have lost theirs. Complain ! to you ! Do you think I want reminding that your hand saved me from utter ruin, and is even now holding me up lest some day I tumble ignominiously into the gutter.”

“Don’t talk of gratitude, Paul. Between you and me the debt is equal. I have a wrong to condone and you a folly to pay for.”

“Wrong ! what wrong have you ever done in your life ? A mistake is not a wrong.”

“Except in its results,” she interrupted.

“And because evil follows good, would you tell me that the good never existed ? ”

“*Certainly* ; things are proven by their results. Can men gather grapes of thorns or figs of thistles ? ”

At this point Violet thought it time to make herself of importance, and having just finished eating an enormous apple

which had amused her for the last ten minutes, she said, pouting,

"What are you chattering about grapes and figs growing on thistles? I don't like it—it's rubbish," lapsing into a cry.

"Come here to me, Vi," Constance said, turning her attention to the child, thankful for any interruption to their present topic. In a second Violet was by her side, eagerly staring up into her face. "Look on the sideboard, Vi. What do you see there?"

The big eyes flashed round, then there came a shout of joy, a clapping of hands, and a rush towards the place where the new treasure lay.

"Strawberries! Strawberries!" shouted the child. "Oh! Constance, you darling dear—strawberries!" and the rosy lips smacked themselves together with an epicure's delight.

"Bring them to me."

Violet brought them, after having had the amusement of dragging a heavy oak chair across the room and clambering upon it to reach the dainties.

There were only four strawberries—ripe and rosy—the first fruits of the season, laid on moss in a tiny cut glass basket. Very tempting they looked, and very pretty looked the little maid watching them, with eager hands half outstretched, in anticipation of what they should presently grasp. Constance took the basket from Violet, and said,

"But we must be good people, I think you will admit it. In so far as that goes, they are all good people, the very best that have lived."

"First and last," adding he bent, "the good people living in my story book."

"Just so, but we must not come out, say, 'I have seen few things are, only just a taste for me people. There is nothing there—you, or I, or Uncle Phil?'"

Just for a moment the smile drew away, the eyes looked full of grief and then with tears in his eyes he said with slight quivering of his lips, "I am not a good person."

"Uncle Phil must have been a good person."

Uncle Phil: "I am not a good person."

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"Why don't you give them to Constance?" he asked, wishing to try her. (Men are so superbly ignorant about children.)

"Oh! that 'ud be all nonsense," the child answered promptly. "You know she wouldn't eat one if it was ever so. Why, she always gives me everything, and never will have any for herself, never, never, *never*," emphasising each adverb more and more strongly.

"You have taught Violet to be honest, Constance," he remarked. "Some people will make generous offers (knowing they must be refused) to gain credit for large-mindedness. And they get it, too."

"Then you can have them, Violet," Constance said.

"No, I don't want to. Uncle Paul must take them home to eat in bed, when he's done all that nasty writing he hates."

"Just as you hate your copy, Vi?" he said.

"But I don't hate it when Constance gives me strawberries after it; so you won't hate your work any more, will you?"

"No, but take the fruit for yourself, child; I don't want it," and he pushed the basket towards her. He intended kindly, but, looking at the little face, he saw that the eyes were once more full of tears and the lips trembling sorrowfully. Woman-like, the child tried to hide her wounded feelings; and, indeed, he could not understand her grief; but Constance, pretending not to see, said to the child, jokingly,

"Don't believe Uncle Paul ; he likes the fruit very much, but he would rather see you eat it, because he likes you even better just as you would rather give it to him, much as you wanted it yourself."

"Didn't want it," petulantly.

"So," unheeding, "so you are both grieving one another, because you both love one another *better than strawberries*—think of that!" Violet laughed. "Uncle Paul did not mean to refuse your nice present ; he only wanted the greater pleasure of seeing you enjoy it, but now he knows you will not enjoy it he will take them home gladly."

"To eat in bed ?" brightening again.

"Suppose we go halves ?" he suggested, "there will be two for each of us."

"I've said won't, Uncle Paul, and won'ts won't." There was a look of stolid determination on the child's face which defied all remonstrance. So, to please her, he took the fruit, saying,

"They do look nice. I'll eat them now." Immediately there was a clapping of hands, and Violet, plunging off her chair, spun round the room on tip-toe, and ended by precipitating herself bodily upon Constance and demonstrating joy by hugging awry her collar, cuffs, and hair. But she was well used to such treatment from Violet, and never had Constance, in heedless irritability, checked one of nature's loving impulses in this child, who yet, as

she told Lady Chalice, had no tie of blood to bind her to it. No, the tie was of another and stronger kind—one which Constance knew could never be broken, on her side, at least; never, or long years ago she had wrenched it in twain and cast it from her. Now she struggled no more against the fetters which bound her to a past, and thus that past was ever present. There were no yesterdays for her.

“Will you come and call on Annas Holt this afternoon, Paul?” Constance asked, when there was silence, returning to her former siege. “You *must* see his pictures, or you cannot do them the justice I require.”

“Can we do justice to anything in these days? It strikes me that if we did so it were to damn it utterly. There are only two ways of making the world notice a man. Slander him, hew him in pieces, vilify him, and people run to see what is the matter—or lavish upon him the most fulsome praise, make him out superhuman, miraculous, and the world thinks *that* a great genius which dare unreservedly to eulogise a fellow creature. No one has the courage to contradict so confident an assertion of perfection, lest he should be thought ignorant of worth, and so everyone echoes it promptly, loudly, that he may not appear less capable of appreciation than his fellows. Which of these equally just and equally admirable methods am I to adopt with your new protégé, Annas Holt?”

He spoke with a bitterness which pained her, for she knew him capable of worthier thoughts. That which he had said might be true, but why should he stoop to vilify what he could not alter? why abuse the world and live in it? Why shut his eyes to the worthiness, the greatness of some men, to see only the weakness of others? Constance took the world as she found it, delighting herself in the bright and flower-covered spots, and she hid the barren places with a carpet of her own sympathy for all human fallibility. Had it not been so, how would Paul Aram stand before her now, feeling himself her equal?

But because it was she who asked it of him, he promised to go with her and be introduced to Annas Holt. For the rest, Constance left Paul Aram master of his own ways and means of advancing the artist's interest with the public. She knew Aram one of the cleverest critics in England and *The Epicurean* a great motive power in the world of art and science.

This magazine belonged to "Loyella," as was well known everywhere, and her name as proprietor gave it a high place in the estimation of "Loyella's" many worshippers. Little, indeed, did these, her patrons, guess that she had bought *The Epicurean* not for self-gratification, not for love of those men whose career was made or marred on its pages, but to save one fellow-creature from ruin, to provide a means of honest livelihood for Paul Aram,

who without it would have lost himself body and soul in a desert of utter hopelessness and emptiness of life. He edited it for her, and his were all those startling leading articles of which unprejudiced readers, quoting parts one to the other, spoke in this wise—

“Does ‘Loyella’ do these herself, think you?”

“Not her style,” another answers; “too cynical, too deep for a woman.”

“Profound—yes, very profound—especially this last. Have you read it? Wonderful mind the writer must have! He seems to grasp the universe! Goethe was a fool to him.”

“And last month he beat Voltaire into fits as a satirist. Who is he?”

“Some poor devil whose brains have been his curse, I’ll wager,” answered a young man, rich and idle. “When a fellow takes to soaring so high as that, hang me if he can ever get down to the earth again.”

“Is he Mephistopheles or Faust, think you?”

“The former, depend upon it; the wiles of the devil are in his words, but none of the weakness of the deluded. *He* can take care of himself.”

“I’d give something to know him.”

“And I.”

“And I.”

"Suppose, now, he's a she," sententiously from the young man.

"Impossible."

"How so? *The Epicurean* is 'Loyella's.'"

"And 'Loyella's' writings are her own. No mistaking them. These are something altogether beyond her, or any woman. Let the subject be what it may, the writing beats anything I know in power."

And so they criticised Paul Aram's works, knowing nothing of the man.





CHAPTER IX.

CASTLEROCK was in a state of excitement, half of it, at least, the impressionable half—the phlegmatic half remained calmly speculative and prudently doubtful. Of this faction Dorothy was the leader, of the other Olive; but they had a happy way of never coming into serious collision one with the other, since among the Challices everyone held his own opinion by right, and not by courtesy.

Mrs. Owen Grant was coming to dinner, and what might follow! What changes in her life and theirs! What revolutionising of sleepy Bay-Hilton! Guy was at home on leave. He would make a point of flirting with her; he always did with every young and pretty woman. “But he can take very good care of himself,” his sisters said—for the family at Castlerock never stuck unnecessary pins into itself, remember. Bertrand would probably be content with writing poetry about her, and holding himself afar off that she might the more long to

approach him. Dorothy would be coldly civil, but calculatively guarded in her conversation with the dangerous stranger, and Olive would love her or hate her for ever and a day from the first moment of seeing her enter the room.

Such, at least, were the parts Lady Challice said her children would be sure to act for the benefit of the new-comer. Ella loved her, "Because," said she, "her name is Constance, and all Constances are darlings;" but Ella not being "out," had gone to bed, and cried herself to sleep under the smart of her brother Pumps' taunts and jeers at her being "Nothing but a little girl."

All the others were waiting in the drawing-room, and with them a goodly assemblage of friends from London, who had come on a visit to Castlerock.

It was not a very interesting place; everything in the house was old-fashioned, and, having been bought at different periods, slightly incongruous. It was not old enough to be historical, or costly enough to be startling, for the Challices of Castlerock were poor, as men are rated nowadays, and they gloried in it, because it had been so always. Plenty they enjoyed, and comfort, solid English comfort, but no superfluous coins were ever tossed about amongst a gaping crowd, congregated to scramble for their possession, nor the possessor bidden to stand at the corners of the streets and glorify the giver. No; the

rooms at Castlerock were truly English, as England was—she is rapidly changing her ideas—and, being English, they had a charm all their own—a suggestion of large families, Christmas games, Yule logs, and roasted oxen—a reminder of generations of births, marriages, and deaths. But the dear old English word “home” describes it without further analysis.

Mrs. Grant was late in arriving, which seemed scarcely commendable in a stranger coming for the first time to dine with strangers. But the Challices were not of the rapidly judging kind; they reserved their opinion—for one shortcoming they would not condemn the whole. She was ten minutes late; the dinner waited—and at last she came.

Very beautiful indeed she was in her white softly-falling classic dress, gold belted and bordered, but plain and girlishly simple. She had not “got up” for the occasion; it was as she would have dined at home with any friend she might have there. Constance Grant was always particular about her clothes, and fanciful, so that many people blamed her for the amount of money she must “waste” upon them.

It was her own, of course; but then people do so delight to apportion unto a neighbour his own income, saying how and where it should be laid out. We are all so much wiser than our brothers!

She made no apology *then* for her late arrival, perhaps because

she knew that many of the party were eagerly listening for her excuse. So she was introduced to one and the other, creating a sensation at once, as she had never failed in doing, all untried-for by herself. But afterwards, talking to Lady Challice apart from the others, she explained, saying,

"I was so grieved at being late, but poor little Violet was ill; she could not go to sleep, and I had to nurse her and sing to her, which prevented my starting at the proper time."

"Nothing serious, I hope?" Lady Challice asked kindly, showing by her interest in the child that she in no wise blamed her guest for so small a breach of etiquette in so womanly a cause.

"Oh! no," smiling; "nothing more interesting than disordered stomach from eating too many green gooseberries. Knowles left the kitchen garden door open, and Vi took the opportunity to enjoy herself after the manner of childhood; for which she paid dearly, poor little pet! But I left her sleeping peacefully. Dennis is to send me word if she wakes and is still suffering."

"I always feel sorry for children's penalties, they are so disproportionate to the sins; the poor little creatures are so delightfully innocent of consequences and so unboundedly happy over their ill-doings."

At this point dinner was announced, and Constance Grant was taken in by Sir Hugh. They sat at a large round table, and on

her other side was Captain Challice, who had insisted on being placed there, saying, "Come now, you know, the governor likes to eat his dinner in peace, and I can do the talking for him."

"How about your own partner, Guy?" his mother had asked. "Do you contemplate sending her to Coventry all dinner time, that you may flirt with Mrs. Grant?"

"Give me somebody decent, and I'll do duty to both, trust me; but if she's old or ugly, mind, I'll behave brutally to her."

"How absurdly you talk, Guy!" Dorothy had said. "*You!* who are always so kind and civil to everyone! If she were old or ugly, you'd talk to her all the more, you know you would!"

"Do I, though? Give me Miss Morris, and you'll see."

But they had not given him Miss Morris; they *had* placed him next to Mrs. Owen Grant; for, somehow, Captain Challice had a way of asserting himself at home, and they of succumbing with culpable weakness. Almost the first thing he said to Constance was,

"Surely I've met you before? I can't be mistaken in your face, now I see it out of a bonnet and veil. I was introduced to you at Lady Hartley's last season—danced a quadrille with you—don't you remember?"

"I am sorry to say I am not able to return your compliment of recognition. I don't separate you from any other partner of

that evening. I have a way of never catching names when I am introduced."

"Oh! for the matter of that, I only remember you because you were pointed out to me as the celebrity I had come up from Aldershot on purpose to see. I make no mistake, do I? You are 'Loyella'?"

"You know me—yes—but please keep my secret. I came to Ray-Hilton for peace, and I do implore you," with mock melodramatic emphasis, "allow me to enjoy it a little longer. Leave your people to discover for themselves that I am anybody beyond *that Individual!* of Hilton Abbey. Will you oblige me?"

"But they would be so proud to know you, especially my mother. She has built up quite a romance on the name of 'Loyella,' being a great admirer of her works. You'd become a very goddess in Ray-Hilton."

"You pay me, or them, or both, a poor compliment. They will not discover that I am worth notice without a catalogue and my name in full to guide them. Or else I am not recognisable as a good thing without being signed and ticketed. Well! Captain Challice's flattery is cleverly selected, we must allow—Seriously, though, I rely upon you to know me and to keep the knowledge to yourself—for the present at least. Come, give me your word on it." She looked at him earnestly, and he was her slave. "It is a matter of some importance to me."

"Of course, if you ask it, how could I do otherwise?" he answered, and turned to make conversation for his rightful partner. It was a difficult matter, with Constance Grant's voice sounding in his other ear, so low and intense, so different from pretty little Ida Vaughan's bell-like tinkle. Sir Hugh was talking to Constance now.

"Very glad I am, very glad indeed, that they made up their minds to call on you at last. Do you know, there's something radically wrong in the constitution of all true born Ray-Hiltonites—something which makes rapid movement in any new direction a matter of danger and difficulty. They're as slow-going as their own carriage horses. Bless my soul! why I've looked up the new tenant at Marshbank—Smiles, you know—and Farmer Hollis of Snowe, and Widow Rose of Starton—uncommonly fine woman she is, by the bye—makes first-rate butter if you should want any—dairy farm, you know—keeps fifty head of cattle. They were all strangers to me, every man Jack of 'em, as we say, but I didn't go worrying myself for a month—first I would call, and then I wouldn't. One must know everybody, my dear Mrs. Grant—everybody, or ought to."

Had Constance been a woman of less discrimination, she might easily have fancied that Sir Hugh was classing her with the farmers of the neighbourhood. But she saw by the honest good-nature of his countenance and by his unconstrained manner that

he was only speaking of those things which lay nearest his heart and made up the sum of his life. Your country squire has little to talk about beyond his tenants and his cattle. Accordingly, Constance took up the subject of Widow Rose and her butter, which she handled so cleverly that Sir Hugh, speaking in a low voice to his oldest friend, Mrs. Leigh, on his other side, said, "Charming woman that—charming!" Only Mrs. Leigh, being deaf, *would* ask him what he said, and he could not speak louder lest Mrs. Grant, again talking to his son, should hear.

"Do you ride, Mrs. Grant?" Captain Challice was asking her.

"When there is anyone I care to ride with. Going out followed by a groom is so horribly slow."

"Join me to-morrow, will you?"

"That depends upon where you intend to go. I am bound to confess that I don't like riding for riding's sake as I ought. But it's a pleasant and easy way of getting where one wishes to be."

"You shall decide that; I have no choice, and am altogether at your service."

"Will you take me to see old Stretting Church? I hear there are some paintings there, *said* to be done by Raphael."

"Willingly; what time shall we start?"

"After sunset, *if you please*. I object to getting scorched, it's so unbecoming," she said, jokingly.

"Do you play lawn tennis?" he asked, after a pause, hoping to enlist her for this also.

"No; games are quite out of my line. I did try tennis once—and tumbled over my petticoats as a graceful beginning."

"All the girls about here play. They manage to keep on their feet somehow—I suppose they put on a different sort of dress."

"It's a very good game for men. We get too red and hot over it. For my own part, I cannot admire melting women."

Another pause. Then, after looking her steadily in the face for a moment, he said suddenly,

"You're musical?—don't say it's not so, now, or I'm lost."

"Yes, I am."

"Thank the Lord! there's not a creature in Bay-Hilton who knows a major from a minor, or Wagner from Offenbach, except, perhaps, Olive—and she's a very poor performer."

"You are musical also, then, I conclude?"

"Educationally—no; naturally—yes. It's about the only decent taste I have; I was too idle to cultivate it in my boyhood or I might have done something, perhaps. Of late years I've taken it up theoretically, as an amusement, I mean. I've simply a mania for *hearing* good music, and I tell you plainly, before we go a step further, that I immediately fall in love with any woman who comes up to my idea of a musician. Not one of your

heartless fingerers of instruments, you know—your sublimely unconscious desecrators of delicious thoughts; but a musician—an artist. Don't believe there are half a dozen such in England—off the stage; as to those on it, I simply adore them all—from a safe distance. But woe be to that unfortunate amateur who shall awaken Guy Challice into a sense of her genius, for he would be a lost soul from that moment, and she his destroyer.”

“Luckily for society, that kind of destruction is easily patched up. But do you sing? You need not have had much early practice for that.”

“I've a voice, such as it is; but one wants some sort of teaching before one dare go in for performing for public benefit. I've never had a lesson in my life, ergo, I don't sing.”

“Do you really want to learn?”

“Want! yes, but what on earth's the good of wanting? There's not a soul in all this place could put me in the way of it. Olive tried once, flew in a rage, flung the song on the fire, and called me an obstinate donkey. She's not far wrong there, either.”

“If I find you have a voice, I will give you some lessons,” Constance said, unhesitatingly. He was so startled by the suddenness of her offer that he could not frame a reply. She laughed at him.

"Oh ! you're not accustomed to such very unceremonious people as I am, I see ; never mind, you'll understand my ways some day. In the meantime, it's a pity to let any natural gift lie fallow for want of cultivation. Besides, it would be an excellent occupation for your idle evenings to come over to Hilton Abbey and learn to sing. Virtue and Pleasure combined, you see ; or rather—that's what I expect you to say."

"Do you mean it ? it's so awfully good of you, really," feeling that he was making a fool of himself.

"You will find out, too, that *my* only virtue is I never say what I don't mean and always what I *do*—which is not quite such safe ground."

"I'll take your offer," he said, recovering. "Without conceit, I can answer for the ear and the voice ; but I'm disgustingly lazy—never persevere over anything, except fishing."

"You are a sportsman, I perceive."

"Can you ask ? Is there anything else worth living for ? If guns and rods became extinct, the *genus homo* would perish."

She was about to argue the point with him, having her own views about the necessity of field sports for the welfare of humanity, when Sir Hugh once more claimed her attention. He did not relish creams, jellies, and such like "flippery," as he called it, so wanted amusing just now, there being nothing more

to be eaten or drunken, for Sir Hugh, fearing hereditary gout, dared not partake too freely of his own good old wines. Conversation with a pretty woman is always an agreeable digestive for middle age, consequently, he indulged himself in it for the remainder of the meal with evident satisfaction.

Captain Challice for the first time in his life looked upon his parent as an "objectionable old bore," and wondered how Mrs. Grant could talk so good-temperedly about crops, beasts, and forcing houses. But in truth she was interested, more so than she had been in Captain Challice's agreeable small talk. Here was a new type of character for her to study, one she had not yet known in all her varied experience. Here was a man of unblemished birth and ancient lineage, of manners unimpeachable and goodness undoubted. A man with physical strength and sound intellect; yet a man whose world was Ray-Hilton and twenty miles round it! whose human race—the people dining at his table or living on his land! His greatest evil—cattle plague and poachers; his greatest good—a thousand brace of pheasants on the first of October, or a fine Alderney calf. His only study—drainage and preserving; his only book—the *Field* newspaper. The one thing to be regretted in life—that the good old days were gone beyond recall; and that his children were no longer Challices of the fine old English type, but modern editions of the same, with modern innovations, and the modern vices of

restlessness and curiosity!! "Never content," he used to say; "always fretting to see and hear things that don't concern you. You'll be wanting to go to London next!" which would have been the crowning point of all unholy desires.

It was amusing to Constance, with her far-reaching ideas on all subjects, to try and screw herself down into some sort of sympathy with this patriarchal view of mine and thine, this primitive idea of space and variety. It must have its charm, she argued, for Sir Hugh evidently desired nothing beyond. He was happy—Epicurus himself could not have denied that fact; but whether such happiness were the greatest good remained as yet unanswered in Constance's mind.

Afterwards, when the women went upstairs, she found herself out of her element, as she had expected, from her experience of the estimation in which her own sex generally held her, without in any way knowing her. She was something to be fought against in a body, because the men naturally congregated on her side of the field, without deigning to fight at all. With one woman of kindred spirit, Constance had often found it easy enough to converse, chattering, woman-like, of all those small things which make up the sum of a woman's life. But in the midst of eight—she was dumb; feeling something of Paul Aram's cynicism regarding the narrowness of minds which could find amusement in discussing the short-comings of servants or

the number of their babies' teeth! All these things (servants especially) are well enough talked of in private, perhaps, with a view to the possible checking of social advancement for our inferiors! We are all justified in struggling against what discomforts us personally, of course. But in a well-dressed assembly, and replete with costly food and wine, such discussions border on the ridiculous. At least Constance thought they did, and never echoed them in consequence. So she sat apart at a small table and turned over the leaves of a photographic album. Lady Challice had gone upstairs to give Ella and "Pumps" their good-night kiss, and Dorothy and Olive chatted with their special friends on the sofa. Presently, however, Lady Challice came down again, and seating herself by Constance's side, began talking to her in a soft motherly way peculiar to herself.

"I hope Guy did not neglect you at dinner," she said, smiling; "but there is little fear of that, I think. He is our gay cavalier, you know."

"So I conclude. He has splendid eyes—and is well practised in the use of them."

"He is a shocking flirt."

"Of course he is. All army men are, or ought to be. What is the use of a man if he can't flirt?" she asked, in a foolish, dare-devil way, which she often put on before women, with some idiotic idea of seeing how they would take it. But Lady

Challice did not afford her the satisfaction of even appearing shocked.

"I should have credited you with having passed the age in which one delights to see a man make a fool of himself and of the girl he flirts with," she said, joking also, with perfect good-nature.

"I think girls know how to value flirting at its worth, and it is certainly amusing for the parties concerned."

Lady Challice laughed. "Oh! I can fancy *you* enjoying it amazingly. But then the game lies entirely in your own hands. You can receive everything and give nothing in return. There would be only one fool in your case, and you can laugh at him."

She had met Constance on her own ground, fenced her with her own weapons, and disarmed her. So Constance laid aside her reckless manner of speech, and felt a great admiration for her hostess's discernment. Lady Challice had not received as gospel a mere foolish jest; consequently, Constance hated herself for having made it. She had only displayed her own weak point, and been ignored by her audience. She felt humiliated, but had learnt a lesson.

"Do you sing or play?" Lady Challice asked, presently.

"Both."

"Have you brought your music?"

Constance smiled at the suggestion.

"I never use a book," she said, simply.

"We will wait till the men come up. Guy is passionately fond of music. He will enjoy hearing you. It is his bitterest complaint against Bay-Hilton that no one here is musical."

"You conclude that *I* am?"

"Do you know I felt sure of it from the first. By the bye, when I called on you, you spoke very warmly on the subject of art. Of course you have read 'Loyella's' last work, 'In High Places'?"

"Oh! yes," carelessly.

"Are you above being taught by one of your own sex, that you speak so contemptuously? Of course you have heard that 'Loyella' turns out to be a woman; for a long time no one believed it. What was your impression?"

"I knew it to be a woman's work."

"And despised it, perhaps? Now, I, being more ignorant of the subjects she handles, think her books the most wonderful, heart-touching, soul-inspiring pictures of a past greatness and a future immortality that have ever been given to us. The one romantic dream left me in my old age is to know their author."

"She may be very like other women, after all."

"With such a mind — such individuality of thought? Impossible. Whatever she might appear in society, if one knew her, one could not surely fail to discover the greatness of her nature. Do you know Guy met her at a party in London last year? He said she was very beautiful, strikingly so, but, as you

suggest, much like other women to talk to in a ball room. I admit this might be so on a casual acquaintance, but no one can hide the good that is in him or her for ever. You may laugh at my enthusiasm. I see you are laughing, but I have gone further than this. I have told Guy if he ever meets 'Loyella' again he is to tell her of an old woman's fancy, and beg her to visit Castle-rock out of sheer humanity. There, Mrs. Grant, now *you* know how foolish an old woman can be, and *I* know how thoughtless a young one. We are quits—let us shake hands."

She held out her hands with a winning grace and Constance took them in her own. It was done playfully, with no sentiment, but Constance felt that if all Ray-Hilton should set itself against her some day when certain hidden things might come to light, this woman, noble-hearted and true, would stand by her always. It was the very first time that she had cared for the goodwill of any of her own sex, the first time it had troubled her whether a woman would be to her a friend or a foe.

Then the men joined them, and Sir Hugh led Mrs. Grant to the piano with the chivalrous gallantry of a forgotten school. Silence was accorded her out of that modern politeness which forces us to pretend an interest in what is essentially irksome to us at a moment when we would fain hear the end of our neighbour's good story, or our own voices contentedly telling a better.



CHAPTER X.

Now, of all the things which drove men headlong to desperation on Constance Grant's account, her voice was the most powerful. She sang in thrilling passionate strains of the intensest of human emotion. And the sentiment of her words was echoed by a descriptive accompaniment of her own composition. Greater even than her talent as an author, greater than her knowledge of art, was her genius for music and the harmonious power of her voice. It were well if the spirits of Mozart and Beethoven could hear one worthy interpreter of their thoughts, she read them by intuition, and long study of the art of expression made their handling perfect.

Once Wagner had said to her, hearing her play some of his music on a violin, "I had believed that no English person could interpret my music as I mean it to be interpreted. But you!—you have caught my ideas without deforming them. Why do you not give the public the benefit of your genius? You

could become our prima donna in a season." But Constance had only writhed under his praise. A picture she hated to look upon rose up in crude, unlovely colours before her mind's eye, and the power of music was gone from her for that evening. Now, so long afterwards, she treasured the remembrance of Wagner's praise, feeling herself worthy of it.

She wondered, when she sat down to amuse her new acquaintance at Castlerock, whether any *one* amongst them would perceive her power—it had often escaped unlearned or soulless listeners. She knew some of them would like her singing—Captain Challice for one—because it played so directly upon the sensations, she having chosen for their hearing a simple love song. But would any of them see beyond, into the heights of her possibilities, or plumb the depths of her knowledge? There was a bald old man, in spectacles, who had spoken a few words with her before dinner—without an introduction; she fancied he might possibly appreciate her, for he had said just a word or two *à propos* of Tannhäuser which showed her he was treading on ground of which he knew the composition from his own analysis, instead of having borrowed wisdom at so much a column from leaders and critiques. Yes, this old man might make it worth her while to give him something better afterwards—if he asked it of her. But as a beginning she sang them only a simple English ballad. Beautifully indeed she rendered it, and ere the

first verse was ended there was that voluntary hush over the room which is so different from the forced silence of mere politeness. Only her voice was heard, rising and falling in delicious cadence which found its echo in every heart, were they wise, or were they ignorant of the nature of that genius from which their pleasure sprang. Constance's voice was eminently sympathetic, and as such she compelled her audience. Turning round when the song was ended to answer some loud-spoken compliment from Sir Hugh, Constance saw that Captain Challice was sitting close to her. His elbows were resting on his knees, and his head on his hand, which covered his face. He did not move when she finished her song, or even say, "Thank you," in chorus with the others.

They begged her to sing again, or to play something "for a change," but she saw they had not understood—not even the old man in spectacles. They admired—yes—as they might have admired a sensation drama—weeping over it till the curtain fell, but ere it reached the ground turning to criticise the head-dress of Lady Mary in the front row. Admiration of this kind was of no account with Constance Grant. She had added her share to the general amusement, but was not disposed to obey the encore. Accordingly she excused herself, saying, and truly, that she was not in a musical mood this evening. Then she went back to her old seat at the table, and talked

to one of the guests, a literary man, about the new works of merit. He was good company, and she felt quite happy in his society. He had been worshipping her all the evening from a distance, and now deemed himself blessed because she had spoken to him of her own accord. After a time Sir Hugh mercilessly called him away to take a side in an argument for *Field* versus *Land and Water*. So Constance devoted herself once more to the portraits. Presently she was addressed.

"Will you take a stroll in the conservatory with me, Mrs. Grant? I want to tell you something. Private and confidential, of course," Captain Challice said, trying to put on his old free manner of speech, but failing dismally. He seemed quite altered. There was a constraint about him which had not been his during dinner.

"Is it allowable?" she asked, referring to the proposed walk.

"Everyone does as he likes here. The Mater herself has gone into the garden with Leighton. Olive has carried off young Heath, Heaven knows where. It's not a party proper; they are staying here, all these people, Come along." He tried to speak naturally, but was still quite unlike his former self.

"I'm going to show Mrs. Grant the conservatory, governor," he said, addressing his father, who happened to be standing near, and, offering Constance an arm, they walked off together. Together they crossed the hall, and entered a large domed

greenhouse, which had been lighted for the benefit of all who wanted change of scene or air. Here they walked up and down a broad path, where palms, bananas, and tree-ferns towered black and fantastic above their heads.

"It's nothing very important, after all," he said, nervously. "Only—well—why the—why didn't you tell me you were musical?"

"Didn't I offer to teach you to sing, now? What impudence you must have credited me with if, after that, you supposed I knew nothing about music."

"Don't joke in that absurd way," he said, rather angrily, for his temper was hasty, and he forgot he was speaking to a stranger—most men did when they talked to her.

"How am I to take you then?"

"You know what I mean—after what I said about music, you must know what effect your singing would have upon me."

"You said you should fall in love," mockingly, "with any woman whose music reached to your standard of perfection.—Please don't put your threat into execution." She spoke so lightly that he could not take her seriously. It was one of those little taunting jokes which she knew how to indulge in without loss of dignity or fear of misinterpretation. He echoed her laugh, or tried to, which he thought quite as effective, since he did not give her credit for being able to discover the unreality of his merriment.

“Look here ; I don’t want to go on talking bosh,” he said, more good-temperedly. “What I came here to tell you is simply this—I can’t go in for those singing lessons we were talking about.”

“And why this sudden change?”

“Since you have remembered what I told you, verbatim, apply it, if you can,” speaking very low.

“About falling in love?” satirically.

“Yes.”

“Why, the speech itself was absurd, and the application of it more so. If I were a young girl, now, forbidden you by your benefactor’s last will and testament, I could understand your desire to put temptation out of your way—but a woman of my age! How *can* you be so absurd?” She was rather annoyed now, and spoke warmly.

“Your age?” he repeated. “Who’s absurd now?”

She felt the reproof, and was conscious that he must fancy this had been said on purpose to call forth an empty compliment from him. But in truth she always forgot how young she really was, she seemed to have lived such a long time, and her very independent position and mode of life made her feel older than her actual years. She hastened to correct the impression.

“I acknowledge myself wrong. I did not think. Of course I am as a girl in your eyes—not in my own, though, I assure

you. When one's young feelings have all worn themselves off, or been rubbed off unceremoniously, one is apt to class oneself with the middle-aged."

"Just so; I understand all that perfectly, and for this very reason I'm not going to accept your kind offer to make a singer of me. Many thanks all the same." A pause. "That's the end of my important communication. Let's talk of something else, hastily. "Is your horse quiet?"

"One of the most docile beasts that money could purchase; therein lies the whole value of him. He looks spirited, but is warranted not to do anything. I told you before, I have nothing of the Centaur nature in me. I like to be carried along safely and to look about me. Riding has the effect of sending my thoughts wool-gathering in every quarter except my own immediate neighbourhood. If my horse were minded to walk into a pond, he would probably carry me with him. But, as I say, he *looks* mettlesome, and I *look* happy, and the public doesn't know what delusions we both are. Neither Butterfly nor I shall bring shame upon your devoted head, believe me—our 'manners' are perfect."

"That's lucky. If one thing is more objectionable than another, it is to ride by the side of a woman who looks as if she and her horse had never met before. Talking of riding, there's a little woman I meet sometimes in the hunting field, who is simply

the most perfect mistress of a horse it was ever my luck to come across—and she rides uncommonly ticklish beasts, too, I can tell you. She's a certain Mrs. Holt—don't know whether you ever heard of her? Isn't in very good odour hereabouts; *I* can't for the life of me discover anything shady, but the Mater won't have her talked about, so I suppose she's better informed than I. The husband's an artist; clever, people say. I fancy, now, *you* would not be very open to prejudice. Do you know anything about them? She tells me no one visits them. That's awfully hard lines, if it's all right, you know. Couldn't one find out? she seems a nice little woman enough; eccentric, but awfully jolly to talk to."

"I happen to have made their acquaintance lately, and I *know* there is nothing wrong. You allude to her being seen so often with young Tom Major, of course?" Constance thought it best to go straight to the point. "Well, if her husband doesn't object, and I *know* he does not, who else has a right to do so? We all know that no woman allows any other woman to be friends with a man," satirically. "I only wonder what they will say of me, when they find out that all my friends are men. They would at least have more justice in their complaint than in the case of Mrs. Annas Holt. She is under her husband's roof, and any person who wished could find out in one interview how they stand towards each other. But, *no*; they would much rather

sit comfortably at home and condemn from a safe distance. Surely your mother is not one of these ! ! ”

“ My mother never speaks ill of anyone, but she can’t help hearing what other people say ; and, to be on the prudent side, she keeps aloof from the Holts. After all, you see, there’s no reason for calling upon them. It would be awkward, anyhow. He’s the son of our village blacksmith, you know. I suppose it’s necessary that women should observe these social distinctions ; all the same, it’s beastly hard lines on her, for she *is* a gentlewoman *by birth*—daughter of our late doctor.”

“ And her husband is a gentleman *by education* ; his manners are unusually refined, and he is an artist. If days be given him, he will be a greater man than any in Ray-Hilton.”

“ What do you mean by, if days be given him ? ”

“ He’s consumptive ; I should say his life would be a short one.”

“ Poor devil ! And you think there is something in him, really ? ”

“ There is *everything* in him. He is a great genius, I tell you.”

“ I wish to heaven I knew something about pictures !—I might give him a lift—but I don’t. No one would believe me if I cracked him up till doomsday. He wants pushing, I take it.”

"I think not. True genius generally finds its own way out of the dark." She spoke with much decision, but felt it lucky that she was not making a statement upon oath just then.

There was no help for it, she having taken upon herself to work for Annas Holt's good. It were to make it an evil, should anyone discover that help had come to him from outside. If he rose, it must appear his own doing, even to himself.

"Perhaps you'll be able to make it all right with the Mater," urged Captain Challice, referring to Lisa Holt again. "By Jove! it is hard lines for the poor little woman."

"How can I hope to lead the mighty potentates of Ray-Hilton? They are far out of my reach. You see, one doesn't know where to attack good people, or how?" she said, gaily. "They have been plunged body and soul into the Styx of their own infallibility, which, Achilles-like, has rendered them invulnerable to the shafts of the wicked. I doubt whether even that one unfortunate heel is left assailable. The gods of to-day have taken better care of their children."

"Awfully satirical, you are! Thank the Lord, I have no chance of falling under your whip; you'd make a coward of me in no time. I think—well, never mind—I won't say what I think."

No, he could not; for suddenly there came upon him a remembrance of passionate music burning into his brain, of feelings

stirring within him which he had never experienced before, and lo! he did not feel so confident that the lash she could wield might not after all fall upon his shoulders, and leave some nasty scars there, if nothing more serious.

Captain Challice knew that what he determined to resist he could resist. But he knew also that, unless he saw any great necessity for self restraint, he should probably do what was pleasantest at the moment, saying to himself, as he always did, "Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof." He liked to take life easily, and had generally found it pleasant enough. "Things come right of themselves somehow," he argued, and so he let *things* go their own way, unless, indeed, he saw without any trouble that this way was *certain* to prove an unpleasant one. If so, he might take some pains to avert it. He was decidedly Epicurean in his philosophy, only it was not in the spirit of philosophy that Guy Challice regarded the affairs of his life, he having a supreme contempt for what he called "twaddle." Nevertheless, he was a true disciple of Epicurus, and carried out his doctrines *Ab ovo usque ad mala*.

How seldom we know what we are! how well we know what we would be! How rarely we act upon one or the other!

Captain Challice took Mrs. Grant back to the drawing room, and soon afterwards wished her good night with the others. Nothing extraordinary had happened; but still, for the men and women

assembled that evening at Castlerock, To-day was gone, and to-morrow, with all its changes, was coming upon them, and so again that

To-morrow, and to-morrow, and to-morrow [which]
Creeps in this petty pace from day to day,
To the last syllable of recorded time ;
And all our yesterdays have lighted fools
The way to dusty death.





CHAPTER XI.

AFTER the dinner at Castlerock there was another at Clifford Clifford's, Esq., of Harleyford. Constance, having once decided upon allowing the people of Ray-Hilton to amuse themselves with her, was not going to be exclusive. If she must act, let it be before a mixed audience, that alternate hisses and cheers might break the monotony of the performance. The Clifford Clifford's invitation was in proper *form*, but with it came a delicately worded note from the head of the family apologising for the late arrival of the invitation. "My son, who is so forgetful," she wrote, "undertook to post the accompanying *a week ago*, and to-day I find it in his coat pocket," &c., &c., &c. Which is, being interpreted, "You see I am not following Lady Challice's lead; my invitation was written, and *ought* to have reached you before I could possibly know you were going to dine at Castlerock."

At Harleyford Constance met a few Ray-Hiltonites, with a

sprinkling of salt from Stretting to give them savour. Here she learnt, to her intense amusement, from the youngest hopeful, who was "had down" before dinner to be "seen," that "The party was not half so big as it ought to be; Mamma said such lots of people wouldn't come, 'cause that flashy-looking woman from Hilton Abbey had been invited." To do the boy justice, he did not know that he was talking to the person in question, and was only possessed with a praiseworthy desire to "amuse" the lady sitting by his side at the expense of Ray-Hilton's public butt. Constance accepted the compliment in the spirit in which it was meant, and thought that if nothing else had been worth the trouble of coming there for, this naïve opinion of her own "desirability" compensated for all other lack of originality in the proceedings of that evening.

It was utterly distasteful to her from beginning to end, although she played two sonatas and sang with all the power that was in her. This she had been able to do, because two or three of the party were celebrated musicians, who knew how to value, not herself, but what she gave them. Captain Challice was there also, and she knew now that his appreciation of her music was perfect in kind, even though his knowledge of it as a science might be defective from want of education. Constance had seen a great deal of Captain Challice since the evening of her dinner at Castlerock, and found him not quite so shallow as she

had at first fancied. Nevertheless, he was not what could be called a learned man on any one point, if we except trout fishing. He was only a philosopher by nature, certainly not by design, as he held all "high-flown bosh" in supreme contempt.

But, with the exception of Lady Challice and the Clifford Cliffords (out of rivalry), none of Mrs. Grant's neighbours had as yet deigned to notice her, and she sincerely hoped they would carry out their good intentions for some time longer. She had come into the country to rest after a tiring London season, in which she had been like a newly discovered comet with a fabulously long tail, which everyone, wise and ignorant, had rushed out to stare at.

And for the month following these dinners she was left at peace once more. Then she spent long evenings with Annas Holt, lying idly on the grass talking to him and Lisa, while Violet romped about with Ray, coquetting like the miniature woman she was; being gracious, domineering, condescending and exacting, as the fancy moved her.

Often Lisa went out, leaving Constance alone with Annas Holt for many hours of those long summer evenings. It did him so much good to be with her; she understood so well how to send "His black devils back to the hell they came from," Lisa said, thankful that he had found sympathy at last—sympathy in that inner artist life which she could not share, dearly as she loved her

Loyella.

and. She had not the soul of art born in her, so why pretend to understand its nature? Lisa was always honest, and for that reason her husband respected her; she was true, and for that reason he loved her.

It was amidst the calm of these happy summer days that a cloud which Annas Holt had seen long ago, but little heeded, suddenly broke in storm drops over his head, chilling him with their cold, damp, patter upon his unprotected shoulders.

It was alone one afternoon, Lisa having gone out riding with her favourite companion, Tom Major. The picture of Pygmalion's statue was nearly finished now. It had progressed rapidly, encouraged by Constance Grant's interest and by her intuitive understanding of the spirit of his work. Nothing was to him more formidable now in the handling of his subject. Only six weeks he had despaired of doing it justice; he had well-nigh cast it up as altogether beyond him! Now there seemed nothing left but a little mechanical labour to finish one of the most beautiful works he had as yet produced. Then, another week he was to start something of a more ambitious kind than he had ever dared to attempt. And it was all Constance Grant's

work. So Annas Holt worked on, and felt glad at heart, for to-day he should take his picture and hang it in her home, to be a part of herself, as all her beautiful things seemed to be. His gift! which she had thought worthy to be placed side

by side with the work of one so world-famed as the Ary Scheffer of her adoration.

Presently Susan brought him two letters; one was from Mrs. Grant, the other a hand quite unknown to him. He read hers first—She had only written asking him to be at home that afternoon as she wished particularly to see him, having good news to tell. Then he opened the other, and this was what lay before him :

Appearances are apt to deceive, and those we most trust to prove unworthy. Watch your household, and you will find that all is not as you believe it. It is so easy to blind credulous men, so difficult to discover imposture. There is danger on horseback if a rider takes to leaping fences which were set up for his good, to keep him out of unsafe places. *Look to your riders.* A friend would warn you before the matter becomes public property.

Annas Holt looked for the signature—there was none. For the address, date, monogram—there was nothing—no clue to the writer—and the character was only a stiff neat text hand, telling neither of sex nor station !!!

Annas Holt uttered a curse, and said aloud, "Fiend! low, cowardly, contemptible brute, whoever you be!" then he tore the paper across and dashed it away from him in his heedless rage. But action had given vent to his anger, and he grew calmer. "After all, I shall do well to keep it, though I soil my hands in the touching," he argued. "I will hunt out the writer and bring down upon his head the shame he merits." So Annas Holt

picked up the envelope, laid the torn halves inside it, and, going to the sitting room, locked them away in his desk, "To come out again by and by," he said, "by and by to lay some craven coward grovelling in the dust at my feet."

But he felt sad at heart. Was it not a confirmation of his own often-recurring fears? Not doubts of Lisa—no, that could never be, he knew her far too well; but the certainty he had always felt that sooner or later Ray-Hilton would seize upon his wife's name to make light of it; that they would presently sow the seeds of the poisonous scandal plant to work her ill. And yet what was Ray-Hilton to him that he should rob *her* of her *one* source of pleasure for their gratification? why should he be told to make her life as barren and sunless as his own? Perhaps it were to kill her, even as he was being killed, for lack of the possibility to loosen even for a moment the tension of a never-ceasing anxiety which was wrenching at his nerves and brain. One or the other would give way *soon*, he felt—and what then? Why Lisa's hand was ready to grasp the rein, Lisa's brain steady to steer clear of all dangers on the road, Lisa's nerve strong to endure, with the strength of youth, and health, and hope. Dare he risk destroying this—and for what?—Only that Ray-Hilton might say they had made him *fear* them at last!! Lisa was a wild animal by nature; to her, life meant action, sunshine, and the healthy excitement of young blood coursing fresh and warm

through her veins, strong with a full draught of Nature's life-giving oxygen. For it *was* life to her when the wind beat in her face and the morning sunshine glowed on her brow and the red fox sped away before her. From childhood Lisa had lived only to hunt and shoot and scour the country unrestrained. But then he, Annas Holt, the blacksmith's son, had stood before her, and taught her that there was something greater after all—Love! For love of him she had defied father, mother, and all Ray-Hilton. He had not stopped to think of her sacrifice then, but afterwards, when reality stared blankly at him, he asked himself, "God! what is this thing of which I have been guilty? The basest of selfish gratification and the ruin of the one creature I love. I have dragged her from home and friends, shut her out from every enjoyment which to her made life worth living; only to starve her in a beautiful prison, side by side with a sickly wretch, who has nothing but his aspirations to exist upon—a pitiful creature, who *would* be great, but has not the power to make his own life. And why, forsooth? Because his parents gave to him as a birthright the curse of a tainted blood and a feeble frame which can endure nothing, brave nothing, risk nothing." But Lisa had never complained; she had only grown a little paler, and the high spirits of her girlhood were gone in a year. She was only seventeen then, the wife of a pauper artist and the mother of his child. She had no pleasures, no friends, no

hope of better things. Still she bore it all bravely for six long hopeless years.

At last the son of their landlord came home to live at Glenlitho. He had horses in his stables, dogs in his kennel, fly-rods, breechloaders—everything which the heart of a sportsman loveth. He found Glenlitho lonely, but did not “take to” the Ray-Hilton neighbours, male or female. They were not of his kind. Chance brought him face to face with Lisa Holt one day as she stood by the park fence looking at a young mare which he had brought from London and “turned out” for a month’s rest. Tears were in Lisa’s eyes, and Tom Major, standing near, heard her say to her boy, who was by her side, “Oh! my son, your mother’s a fool! but she would feel better if she could just spring on that jolly little cob over there and have a swinging gallop right away to yonder hills. I had a horse once, Ray—I wonder where he is now.—My poor Byron!—Do you know that the only regret I felt in marrying your father was leaving my horse behind. And they sold him, Ray; yes, my own father sold him at Tattersall’s out of spite, because I would be Mrs. Annas Holt. Yes, Ray, we are all fools, but I would give *‘my kingdom for a horse.’*”

And great ugly Ursa Major heard her talking to the child, and saw the tears welling over in her round brown eyes. Like many another ugly person, he had a good heart, as hearts

go ; and so, stepping up to her and standing by her side, he awkwardly and with much blundering offered to lend her Belle-Belle and—if she would—to accompany her in this mad career hillwards.

Gladly enough Lisa accepted his offer, knowing quite well who addressed her—and so it had all begun. After that they met often ; rode, drove, walked together, and—*delighted* Ray-Hilton ! So it had continued for nearly two years, and scandal, if rife, was not yet loud, or if loud, it had not reached Annas Holt's ears—not, at least, distinctly enough to set them burning and aching as they were doing to-day. But the blow had fallen upon him now with a suddenness that made his brain whirl till he felt as if he should die under it.

He could stop all this with a word—all these happy meetings—that he knew full well, but—should he ?—Dare he rob her life of its only pleasure, even for the good of her name ? Would any in Ray-Hilton ask Lisa into their houses, let her name be never so spotless amongst them ? If there was no other dirt handy to cast upon her, there was the sticky mud of her husband's birth. She was the doctor's daughter, who had run away with Annas Holt, whose father worked the old smith's forge on the high road to Stretting ; ay, and his grandfather before him. Now the doors of the smithy were shut, the roof was falling in, and the rats made a dwelling there ; because, forsooth, the

only son had fancied himself born to something greater than his father's honesty! He had tried to grow up learned by buying "all sorts of books, utterly unsuited to his class," as they said, "when he ought to have been at work learning his trade." To make matters worse, an eccentric old retired schoolmaster in Ray-Hilton had, out of "mistaken kindness" for the boy artist, taken him into his house, and, treating him as a son, had given him "a perfectly unnecessary and demoralising education," as they said again. Then the old man died, and left a sum of money to Annas Holt, with the house they had lived in together. Afterwards the young artist went abroad to spend his money in that study which was necessary for his art's sake and for the furthering of his ambition.

After some years he came home—home again to Ray-Hilton, for there lived Lisa—Lisa who loved him, and, loving, forsook all others for him. Annas Holt had a deep affection for Ray-Hilton, so had his wife. They clung fondly to its hills, its woods, its wild sweeps of moorland with the sunlight and the cloud shadows rolling over it. They loved the little flower-covered home in which he had lived so long with the old schoolmaster. Therefore, despite the objections of their neighbours, they had stayed on at The Ford Cottage, living their own lives; and hitherto, undisturbed. Lisa's family had left the place, the shame of her marriage having been too great for them to

support in the face of that Ray-Hilton which had once honoured them.

But to-day Annas Holt saw that a change had come. They were no longer to be left alone—it was their “innings,” and they had been called upon to play their part in the game of Ray-Hilton life. An ignoble part enough, with no glory to be gained anywhere. Surely, surely, it would be better to take no heed of this call to action, but rather allow the other players to pronounce what judgment they would upon them, and afterwards to bear their proscription meekly.

Annas Holt did not know; it seemed to him that there was very little worth living for anyhow. But he was certain that Lisa’s name, be it clean or be it unclean, would always be spoken with a sneer as being *his* wife. “Why, then, should I sacrifice her?” he argued. And yet she *was* his wife, and what man likes to feel that his wife’s name is upon other men’s lips, let himself be never so certain of her honesty?

Suddenly it struck Annas Holt that he would ask counsel in this matter—and of whom? One almost a stranger to him, yet one he felt would be a friend in need; a loyal, unprejudiced friend, who would judge them all wisely. He fancied that Mrs. Grant did not much like Lisa personally—their characters were too utterly opposed one to the other; but he knew this would not warp her judgment—or thought he

knew, in those early days of their acquaintance, when he trusted her implicitly.

Having decided to lay a part of his burden upon other shoulders, and to beg help of this new friend, he again turned his attention to the picture before him. It would not be long ere he should hear her horse's footsteps rattling down the long lane which led from the high road to The Ford Cottage. But he could not paint; there was no more of the artist in him now than of the hero.

He was not a great man, this Annas Holt—far from it; he was only a great genius. There is a wide difference between the two. Possibly his view of the unattainability of a worthy life with a feeble frame was not so far misplaced. Strength of mind and physical weakness are not often co-existent. Genius there may be, dazzling, but fitful always and unenduring, because unsustained by the physical force of resistance. Genius is an essence, greatness a substance, but the substance is nothing if it have neither the wherewithal to force itself into active existence nor the necessary soil in which to develop. If the tree be weakly, it will not bring forth the fruits of greatness, though it may blossom with fair promise now and again. So at least thought Annas Holt, with the curse of constitutional disease laid upon him from his birth. Sometimes he put forth flowers rich and rare, and the winged creatures of Hope flitted and danced

around them right joyfully. But the blossoms had died away one after the other, and the butterflies had lived their day, and nothing remained, or followed. There might be more butterflies and more flowers called forth by the sunshine of laughing eyes and tender human sympathy ; but fruit, good fruit for man to gather in and garner, *never* for him.

It was thus he argued in the present bitterness of his spirit, sitting alone in the studio and thinking of that coward's weapon, the anonymous letter.





CHAPTER XII.

LUCKILY, it was not long before Constance Grant arrived, joyful, because of the good news she had come to tell him. Violet was with her, as usual, but Violet ran off to look for Ray, who, as she condescended to say, "Was not such a bad boy after all, 'cause he gives me lots and lots of blackberries." So again Constance found herself left alone with the artist.

She saw by his expression, and by the nervous twitching of his long white fingers, that something was troubling him ; at once she remarked upon it, saying, in conclusion,

"But I have come to alter everything, to set all your prospects in a new light. Lachesis has begun to turn her wheel another way, for your especial benefit."

"Then I had rather she kept it on in the old direction, if her benefits are of the kind they would appear. You are more right than you think—things have changed for me."

"Let me tell my story first," she said, hoping to cheer him ;
"I think it will be interesting."

"As you like. Let us get out of this room—the closeness of it is stifling me."

She did not answer, feeling so certain that the news she had brought would straightway set him on the pinnacle of a temple, from which he would look down upon all the kingdoms of the world and believe them his. She knew that his soul was so easily set soaring away from the things of earth on the wings of an artist's dreams.

So they left the studio and strolled side by side across the lawn to a clematis-covered arbour, which Nature had made at the end of the long straight path bounding the garden. Here they sat down to talk.

"My tale is told in a few words," she said, quickly, pulling off her hat and gloves that she might feel at ease. "Of course, Mrs. Holt told you that I had called yesterday with a friend while you were at Stretting?"

"Yes, I believe she did," dreamily.

"This friend is a great lover of, and connoisseur in, art. He came to see your pictures, which your wife showed us.—You see I took advantage of your permission to have the *entrée* of your studio.—I had expected Mr. Lawson to admire your work and to know its worth, for he and I are generally agreed upon

these matters; but he went beyond—he was simply infatuated, especially with the ‘Breath of Life.’ He besought me to give up my claim to it and leave the way clear for him to purchase—at your own price. But I was not going to relinquish my rights or give up the treasure I so greatly value. I almost offended him by my refusal, for he is as obstinate as wealthy, and doesn’t like being thwarted. However, he has contented himself with extracting a promise from me that I will do my best to get you to paint him something on commission, and—indeed, you could not work for a more worthy end. He is no speculator in art, remember, but a true appreciator of its greatness, and he has one of the most perfect picture collections I have ever seen.”

“And you would not let him have the ‘Breath of Life’? Why?—But I need not ask. You knew it would hurt my feelings. You are kind, very kind. How well you understand me! But why consider me?”

“You are giving me credit for what I did not do. It was selfishness, pure selfishness, which made me refuse my good old friend. I could have found it in my heart to give him anything he had asked of me, except your work—or my Ary Scheffer. Pictures are as children to me when I feel sad or lonely.”

She knew that he would rather see his picture loved than himself, rather know her tender towards it than towards him. Consequently, she could not have given him a sweeter draught to

drink had she sought it over earth or heaven ; and to speak his name in one breath with that of Ary Scheffer was to intoxicate him with the delight of it. She noticed how a glow sprang up into those dreamy eyes and played about the sharp, anxious features. He had such perfect faith in the sincerity of her praise, and she was glad that in all honesty she could give it to him. Rarely had she seen works so pure in tone, so poetical in expression, as his. In good truth she loved them for their worthiness.

“And will you gratify my friend ?” she asked, presently. “Will you begin a picture for him as soon as mine is out of hand ?”

“I cannot think of pictures now,” he answered, fretfully. “There are other things filling my mind.”

“Nevertheless, you should consider your own interests, since with them are combined those of your wife and son. You tell me it is with difficulty you struggle through life. The way will be easier when”—jokingly—“when my friend’s picture is finished.”

“You are alluding to money, I suppose ? Do you know,” rousing, “that once, when I was young and hopeful, I registered a vow never to sell a work of mine—never to prostitute my soul for gold, and yet necessity drove me to perjure myself. All that was great in me has fallen under the petty struggle for mere existence. You must know as well as I do that it is the

golden canker which, eating into the heart of modern art, is driving its soul hellwards. But how destroy the worm, since man must eat and drink, lest to-morrow he die ? ”

“ I doubt whether in these days it were possible for anyone to maintain your ideal purity. As ‘ Loyella,’ I am of course bound to uphold it, as being the only true artistic spirit ; but as Constance Grant I may confess that such possibility is purely theoretical. Luckily, the poetical spirit still hangs about art, and sheds a sort of halo round it which has no substance, no reality, and yet is very fair to look upon. I fear, if we could peep into most of our modern studios at various odd moments, we should find the veil lifted, and poetry would be to us an empty sound for evermore in connection with picture painting.”

“ Then were it not better to lay down the attempt to elevate what, according to you, *can be* nothing but a hollow mockery, unless the whole system of life should change again and slide gently backwards to the old pastoral state ? ”

Constance’s reply, if she had been framing one, was stopped by Lisa’s huge mastiff Leo, who came bounding up to them, having nobly stooped to forgive Mrs. Grant’s first ignorant handling of his chain. This interruption awoke Annas Holt to the urgency of the moment.

“ I had quite forgotten that it is my turn to tell a story now,” he said, with his old nervous laugh. “ Mine is much

more exciting, although somewhat less elevating in its tendency."

"It ought to be a success, then—You see I represent the public!" satirically.

"You! God forbid!"

And then he told her in strangely simple language of the letter and its contents, and he repeated his own arguments for and against the happily unconscious Lisa.

"Now, what shall I do?" he asked, relying on her always. "Shall I say to her, 'I don't like to see my wife so much occupied with Tom Major; it is an extra anxiety for me—another pain for my weakly constitution to bear, and you know I have but little strength, Lisa'—for, remember, that this is the light in which I must set the matter before her. To say that Ray-Hilton objected to her doings were only to make her glory in defying them, and, out of bravado, brave them anew."

"There she has my most hearty sympathy—but go on."

"She would attend to *my* slightest wish, and what then? Only this—day by day I should hear her laugh less often, romping with her boy and Leo. She would walk soberly instead of running like a young colt. By and bye her cheeks would grow pale and her eyes dull. I know this, remember, for I have seen it all before. Ray would say to her, 'Mother mine, what is the matter with you?' and she would only answer, 'I am not over

well, my boy,'—for she never deceives her son—'but don't mind me; run out with Leo; see how the poor fellow wants a scamper.'”

Annas Holt paused, and Constance saw that there were tears in his eyes. “Let me hear all,” she said, with a woman’s tenderest sympathy; “I shall judge better if I see your view of the case. What then?”

“What then! Can you ask with *me* by your side? Surely you can see what then—how that if Lisa do not die she will grow like me—morbid, despairing, diseased in mind and body, and so physically unable to fight our battle against poverty and hopelessness. Everything depends upon her, do you see? it is her young dauntless spirit which has buoyed us up by the strength of its own healthfulness. Shall I, then, take this one blessing away from her, that Ray-Hilton may be satisfied? or shall I support as another evil of my life the torturing knowledge that I and mine are the theme for men’s after-dinner stories and women’s tea-table gossip—I, who am so proud—of nothing?” he added, mournfully. “Judge for me, if you would show yourself my friend.”

Constance, listening, understood all he would have her do for him, and she felt (knowing Annas Holt’s weakness) that once again she was called upon to decide the direction of a wavering balance—to sway it for weal or woe on the right side or on the

left. For the second time in her life it was given her to carve out a path for another, and bid him walk in it for better or for worse. She was not afraid ; but what if again her judgment should err—if she should once more ruin a life she had set herself to save ? But no ; she had learned wisdom by experience.— And yet she was going deliberately to counsel Annas Holt to defy the world for love of Lisa, his wife. She was silent for a few minutes, and then standing up before him, as he still sat with stooping shoulders and bowed head, she said :

“ Tell me one thing. Are you perfectly certain that you ‘ personally ’ have no doubts of her, nor ever will have ; that anything men or women may say will not make *you* suspect her for a moment ? Are you sure of your own perfect trust in her honesty ? ”

“ Had I doubted, I should not have asked your help. You must have misunderstood me,” he said, in proud, cold reproof.

“ Then,” she answered, not heeding him, “ then—Let her be happy in her own way ; and since but one way lies open to her, leave it open and pay the toll, if Ray-Hilton demands it. By how much are you the worse then than now ? ”

“ By the sum of the worth of her good name. My God ! how shall I endure to know that the lips of honest women curl as they sneer my wife’s name, and that the eyes of all men—honest

and dishonest—wink one to another as they discuss her freely amongst themselves? It will kill me.”

“But will it kill her?”

“Have you so little understood her character?” fretfully. “I tell you she would rather glory in the sense of her own blamelessness. I can even picture her, on some bright winter morning, coming ‘in at the death,’ side by side with young Major, turning to some neighbour, in her own droll way, and remarking, ‘How I pity your sisters sitting moped up indoors, reddening their classical features over a fire, and wondering when the next ball will come off, or (if already satiated) what is left of pleasure in life! Deluded creatures! when there is always the sun, the air, and their own limbs to enjoy it.’—That is the tone Lisa always takes with her ‘betters,’ and that is the only way those virtuous sisters affect *her*. But for myself, *I* should know that, looking at her afar off through their field glasses, side by side with their mothers and their friends, they would be saying, ‘There is that Mrs. Holt again on Tom Major’s Belle-Belle; he has at least one woman in Ray-Hilton to stand up for him!!’ Good God!! I tell you, Mrs. Grant, it will kill me.”

“You will not hear it, for you never go amongst them.” She sat down again in her old place opposite him, preparing to argue the matter.

"Can I not imagine it all? Will it not be written on their faces as they pass me on the highway?"

"And can you not bear that also for her sake?" A pause—then, bending over towards him, "Does she not bear a great deal for yours?" earnestly.

"That has been the natural consequence of having given her life to one so unfit for the charge. It was her one great mistake—poor little woman!"

"But she is happy enough in her present life, you say, and I'm sure she looks so. Since you so much regret the suffering you have brought upon her, why hesitate about allowing her to take what alleviation falls in her way?"

She was pleading warmly for fearless little Lisa, so strong in the sense of her own honesty. And yet Constance understood well enough the natural horror of a weak and nervous man lest "the world's taunts and the world's jeers" should presently fall upon him. "Men, even the strong, are so much more thin-skinned than women," she argued; "they can't bear moral torture half as bravely as we do." But after this she spoke less seriously, not wishing to appear either to moralise or to preach for Annas Holt's benefit.

"Besides," she continued, "if people grow very evil-minded, and persist in showing you their own smallness in the way it has been done this morning, you can leave Ray-Hilton."

"And go where—do what?" he answered quickly. "Here I have at least a roof to cover me, a house to call my own. Perhaps you don't know that The Ford Cottage belongs to me; it was left me by the only friend I ever had—he who was father, brother, and teacher to me." Annas Holt could scarcely speak now. "The spot is sacred from association with him." A long pause; then, rousing, suddenly, "No—no; if Ray-Hilton lashed me with leathern thongs, they should not drive me from the only spot on earth which claims me. Lisa loves it too, and the boy is a part of it. No, I say, they may kill us, but we shall die *here*."

There came into Annas Holt's eyes as he spoke a fixed look of determination, like to some hunted animal, which, driven into a corner and surrounded by its enemies, will not move from the place again till they drag it away dead. It was the first spark of life in him that had burst into flame, and Constance rejoiced over it. "Disease has left some energy in him still," she thought; "I may use it for his good. How great this man might be, and how small he is! How grandly conceived, how poorly moulded! A rare flower blooming in an uncongenial soil. Will it bear transplanting?" she asked herself, "or will it die in the uprooting? Anyhow, it were well worth the trial."

"Have you any idea who wrote that letter?" she asked,

presently, waking suddenly from a reverie—so suddenly, that her manner of putting the question seemed to Annas Holt scarcely natural. He looked at her keenly, answering:

“None—but you have.”

“Indeed, no—what makes you think so?”

“The manner of your asking.”

“Abstraction, I suppose; I scarcely knew what I was saying. Two things were in my mind at that moment—though philosophers tell us such a state cannot be.”

“Strange! I am rarely mistaken in following the line of a person’s thoughts, it has been so much my habit to do so. I felt certain that you either knew or very strongly suspected the writer.”

“How could such a thing be? I know no one in Ray-Hilton well enough even to speculate as to the probability of his being capable of writing anonymous letters.”

“You will have more means of finding out than I; if you are my friend, help me in this.”

“I’m not a detective by profession,” she answered, laughing; but he was too much in earnest to bear being joked with.

“The first thing I ask of you is refused,” he said, fretfully; “and yet you profess to wish for my happiness.”

“Surely the way to be happy is not to go about seeking to discover evil and to expose evil doers? Find out, rather, the

good which lies hidden around you, and for the rest, leave them to reap their own reward. Why darken our way with the shadow of somebody else's evil genius? We only get a fright for our trouble—Put the letter in the fire."

"On the contrary, I have locked it away in my desk, and there it will stay till it helps me to call someone *liar* to his face."

After all, then, this man had a great deal more spirit of an evanescent and fitful kind than Constance Grant had hitherto credited him with. Perhaps he would not be so easy to lead in her ways, after all. "If it be so, the game is still better worth the playing," she thought. There was certainly some element in Constance Grant's constitution which delighted in a struggle to win her own way against all odds—to say, "I will do this thing," not knowing whether it would be easy or difficult of accomplishment, and *to do it*.

She had given Annas Holt the advice he asked for respecting Lisa, but he did not seem disposed to accept it. "He is only like other people, after all," she said, excusing him; "there is nothing in this world more eagerly sought for than advice, and nothing so little followed. We're all hypocrites after our kind."

But she did not revert to the subject again—It had nothing to do with her schemes for the artist's advancement whether he decided to leave Lisa free, or to bind her down with

the chains of conventional right and wrong. Therefore, Constance suggested that they should take a walk for a change. So they left the arbour and turned up the path, which was the only straight and level walk in the grassy tree-covered garden.

In a short time Lisa joined them, running, hat in hand, with her habit held up far over her boots, and her short brown curls standing on end in the wind. These curls were the misery of her life, because, even by force of brushing them with water several times a day, they refused to be kept "tidy"—tidiness being Lisa Holt's religion. At her heels followed Leo, and a little further off Ray, dragging Violet by the hand.

"Oh, beloved Annas," Lisa panted, "I have news for you. We are looking up in the world—'Morning, Mrs. Grant," nodding her head, and smiling a welcome; then, going on rapidly, addressing her husband, "The Ursa and I fell in with Captain Challice to-day on our ride. We joined forces—and what followed? My lords and gentlemen found your humble servant such good company that they ended by inviting themselves to dinner here to-night to have the pleasure of making *your* acquaintance, they said—but don't flatter yourself, my beloved, I'm the attraction. I told them there wasn't bit or scrap for them to eat if they did come; only, unfortunately for my veracity, Ursa Esquire reminded me that he had sent in two brace of birds and a hare from our yesterday's "bag;"

so I was shut up, but not done for. I tried on *you* next as an antidote. Declared that you hated strangers. Alas! this was a worse failure. They said, such being the case, they had determined for the last month that you should not be a stranger to them any longer—their month, by the bye, dating from Saturday last, 1st September, 1879, when, being in a benign and charitable frame of mind—the result of fifty brace of birds in their bag—my Lords Challice and Bufus determined ‘To look up that fellow Holt, you know’”—mimicking to perfection the tone and gesture of Tom Major.—“How do you feel after it, my husband?” she asked, wickedly, giving him a tap over the shoulder with her riding whip. Then, throwing her arms round the dog’s neck, “And what’s your opinion of life generally, Leo, my wise boy?”

“Lisa, I cannot see your friends,” Annas Holt replied; “they only come to *patronise* a poor artist and his wife. Let them bring their sisters and their mothers if they would compliment me. I might welcome *them*.”

“Heaven protect *me* if they came!” she exclaimed, with comic fervour.” (Everything that Lisa Holt said or did was essentially droll.) “But *patronise*! picture the Ursa *patronising*! Why, he’s the best hearted, empty-headedest” (mockingly) “old humbug going. But he’s vastly amusing, and that covers a multitude of sins.”

"But would be no reason for his appreciating me, or I him, Lisa."

"And why shouldn't I have my company, please?" pretending to pout; "that's to say, if they don't object to bread and cheese without any butter for supper. That's their own look out. Come, now, be good, Annas, and receive your wife's friends politely," Lisa said, with amusing gentleness, tucking her arm through his, and walking with them up the path.

Now, Lisa firmly believed it would do her husband good to mix with other men, and it was for his sake alone that she had this day consented to receive Captain Challice and her old friend the Ursa, as she called him, at her own house. Lisa knew, as did Constance Grant, that to work a thing for Annas Holt's benefit it must not so appear to him. He must be made to look upon it as a self-sacrifice for love of some other person. To give Lisa pleasure he would always forego any selfish whim, of course believing himself a martyr the while, as it was his nature to believe. Selfish in thought, but unselfish in deed; tender and clinging always, but of a highly strung nervous sensitiveness, Annas Holt was a man to love, perhaps, but scarcely to respect—as a man.

Constance, with her ready tact, here came to Lisa's aid. Turning to him, she said, "And I am going to invite myself to dinner also; so on *you* will fall the honour," laughing, "of entertaining

me. The fact is, I am making use of my friends to-day, for my cook having left me suddenly last night, I am dinnerless, unless you will come to the rescue."

"How can I ask you to share such food as ours—you, who are accustomed to the choicest cookery?"

"Now then, Annas," interrupted Lisa, "don't be untrue to your colours; I thought you would back your wife as the best cook in England. Why, it's the only good quality I really and undoubtedly can boast of. Come, now, I back myself (since you won't do it for me) to cut out Mrs. Grant's French cook, unless, indeed, she has so wedded her mistress to sauce tartarre and garlic that there is no estranging her affections."

"And you ask me to display our poverty before strangers? Why Lisa, how can——"

"On the contrary," she interrupted; "we will humbug them into believing that we're not poor at all. Susan is a first-class parlourmaid, after two years of drilling. Be not afraid, my husband, I will not put you to shame before those mighty potentates—Thomas Major, Esquire, of Glenlitho, and Captain Guy Waltham Challice, of the something Cavalry!!! Now, Mrs. Grant, preach at him, please; I'm going in to prepare."

And she was off across the grass and out of sight in a moment, with all her followers in the wake, for Violet adored her as much

as Ray did—Lisa having the rare gift of being able to make herself one with children and dogs.

Constance had not much difficulty in persuading Annas Holt, since she was to be of the party, and would afford him a refuge from the dreaded strangers. Perhaps he was not sorry to feel that some human life was breaking in at last upon the desert solitude of his existence. Possibly he had fair visions of good fellowship and brotherly sympathy to be found somewhere amongst men. He acknowledged neither the yearning nor the hope, but rather pitied himself for his weakness, saying,

“You know how it tires me to argue; the mere physical exertion of opposition is too much for this miserable frame of mine. Do as you will; a little time more, and it will not matter to me who comes or who goes. If I can make Lisa happy, there will have been some good in my life for others to tell of.”





CHAPTER XIII.

THE numbers of Annas Holt's self-invited dinner party had swelled, either by design or accident, as the hours went by, and instead of two visitors they had four. Constance, when she went home, had found Paul Aram waiting to see her on a matter of business connected with *The Epicurean*, and she had compelled him also to come in to the feast. During the afternoon she had sent her own kitchen-maid to The Ford Cottage to help Lisa do the cooking. With the girl she sent a hamper of provisions and a very amusing note. In it Mrs. Holt was implored to have pity on the fowls, &c., "which, having no one now to consume them," so she wrote, "were rapidly going to the bad, for very soreness of spirit. Waste not, want not—you know, and behold the occasion for the carrying out of this principle, by immediate utilisation of a dinner left on hand by the unprincipled defalcation of a French Knave of *Tarts*," with more in the same joking spirit. So that Lisa Holt could not feel hurt

by the offer of food wherewith to cover her table this evening. But, indeed, she was not the sort of person to imagine insult in a kindness or to take offence where none was meant. She acknowledged her poverty honestly, and honestly accepted help, even as she would have given it had others stood in her place.

Not so, however, her husband ; and the little by-play of this first dinner farce was carefully concealed from his remark. Lisa entered into the spirit of it with the natural love of fun which was in her, and Constance played an admiring and encouraging audience. No one guessed during the dinner how many little blunders and what awkward pauses were slurred over by her ready wit and Lisa's never-failing good humour, or how many significant signs and winks passed, unobserved by the company, from one woman to the other at various points of failure in the proceedings. But the food was good in every detail, Lisa having been the cook, and done herself great credit. If she had one vain-glorious spot in her nature, it was her belief that in all culinary art she could successfully vie with "the profession."

Tom Major, who knew Mrs. Holt's weakness in this respect, betrayed her, in his good-natured blundering way. But she was not ashamed ; and the present company all thought better of her for her womanly capabilities. Hitherto they had only seen her in the field, one of themselves, and treated as such.

Captain Challice had proposed himself a member of this club from various impulses, on which he had not tried or cared to reason. He knew quite well that where Mrs. Grant was likely to be there would he be also. He was quite aware of having caught his feet in her soft, brightly coloured net—but it did not hurt him as yet, so why should he try to escape? Perhaps, also, he had some idea of trying to find out for himself what kind of person this much-abused, manly little woman, Lisa Holt, really was; with a vague notion of converting his family to her and hers. And this, too, because—alas! it all reverted to the same thing—because Constance Grant would lay the credit of a good deed at his door.

Paul Aram also was there on Constance's account, for she had given him no option, saying, in a way he never resisted, coming from her, "Go with me to Annas Holt's this evening." There was no weakness in this man's disposition, no tendency to waver or hesitate, yet he, too, bowed to Constance Grant's will—only from a widely different cause. He was a man who, having set himself in defiance of the world, fought it with brain and hand. He would not yield an inch, he would reap satisfaction in full for every evil it had ever dealt him. Men should *fear* him if they would not love, and for women—well, they had always been easier to manage—easier, at least, to him, whose will was his own law—and yet it was to a woman

Paul Aram owed his present servile and, as he looked upon it, degraded position.

The Ursa Major was simply in his element. He could laugh and bounce about, and pump out his heavy jokes, without bringing upon himself either the scornful looks of neighbours or the fretful reprimands of his father. He could discuss the "points" of his mare, his guns, his setters, or his hounds, and be certain of a lively response from his amusing little "chum," as he termed Lisa Holt. And after dinner, when they were all sitting over their wine (never mind where it came from—Lisa knew) and some filberts and pears which grew in Annas Holt's garden, the Ursa Major remarked, throwing over a glass, and making a fruitless scramble to recover it as a preliminary to his discourse, which always opened with a noise of some kind, "Why Mrs. Holt, I declare really—why, you're not a bit different at home—not a bit."

"What did you expect to find me?"

"I—I—thought you'd put on company manners, like other girls—was shivering in my shoes at the idea of facing you in your own den—was indeed. What are you laughing at now—what have I said?"

"Shoes! did you remark?" Lisa answered, casting her eyes up and down over his huge body. "Shoes! where are they? you might have flattered us by putting them on,

if you possess a pair! we don't generally go out to dinner in clodhoppers!!"

"By Jove! yes, quite forgot—that's the way with me; changed my coat, you know—never thought about the boots. I'll run home and change, be back in half an hour;" and he started up from his chair, knocking it over in his eagerness to be moving somewhere; anything was preferable to sitting still round a dinner table, "business" being over.

"What humbug!" Lisa replied, with more familiarity than politeness. "You know I shouldn't care if you had no boots at all on, except that you might have urged it as an objection against a little scheme which I have on hand for your amusement this evening."

"Out with it, then—but I'm awfully sorry, you know, honour bright—it's just like me," sitting down again with a bump.

"There are two wasps' nests in the field next to our garden which *must* come to an untimely end to-night. Now, you're just in a condition to lend me a helping hand with them. All the implements of war are ready—Where are those squibs you promised to bring?"

He produced a handful from out of his vast shooting pocket—for if he had changed his coat, as he said, it was only to put on another of the same kind, which might have been half a degree less dirt-begrimed than the one discarded. "All right,"

she continued, pocketing some of the squibs. "Now go and fetch the spade and the watering can and some paper—oh! and matches—and if you forget a single item I shall lose all respect for you. I'm just going to look at Ray. You go on; I'll pick you up before you reach the Wellingtonia, at your slow rate of progression."

So the Ursa Major lumbered into the perpendicular, took the room at two strides, and, allowing the door to slam behind him, left the rest of the party to themselves.

Manners at The Ford Cottage were decidedly Bohemian, for the men had lighted their pipes, and Lisa had fetched some stockings which she was knitting for Ray, even while they were still sitting round the dessert table.

Constance was idly joking with Captain Challice, who said to her presently, when Mrs. Holt and Tom Major had gone off on their murderous expedition against the wasps, "Suppose we take a turn outside. Look what a jolly moon there is! Come along—don't be lazy." For Captain Challice had grown quite intimate with Mrs. Grant after three months' acquaintance and constant association. She often spent the afternoon at Castlerock now; Olive had fastened her ardent young affections upon her, and was never content to be away from her long. Guy, being Olive's special "chum" of the family, generally accompanied her on her visits to Hilton Abbey, and they all rode and drove

together daily. Consequently, an almost brotherly and sisterly intimacy had grown up between them—only on Captain Challice's part it was not quite Platonic.

"Very well," Constance replied to his suggestion of a walk. "Our friends over there seem pleasantly occupied together," looking across at Annas Holt and Paul Aram talking earnestly over some sketches in a further corner of the room; "they won't miss us." So, rising, she put her arm through that of Captain Challice, and the window being open, they wandered out into the mild autumn evening, leaving the other two alone in the dining room.

They had not been talking about art, as Constance supposed—not, at least, for the last ten minutes. Sketches lay before them, indeed, but unheeded, for Annas Holt had been telling Paul Aram the story of that anonymous letter with which he had been lately favoured, and asking the other's advice as to the best manner of tracing the writer.

"Did you keep the letter?" Paul Aram asked, after he had heard the story.

"Yes—against Mrs. Grant's advice."

"Did she tell you her reason for wishing it destroyed?"

"Some general principle, that we gain nothing by trying to expose evil doers. But, you see, it is not *her* wife who has been abused. It is so easy to theorise about what in no way

affects us. Her principle is no doubt right, but the practice of it—impossible.”

“Let me look at the letter, if you don’t mind. One may discover something.”

“No ; I have examined it carefully.”

“So you think ; two brains reach further than one.”

“You are quite welcome to satisfy yourself. If in so doing you can satisfy me also, I shall thank you heartily for your help.” Saying which Annas Holt opened his desk and took from it the envelope and the two half sheets of paper, into which, in his rage, he had torn the cowardly libel. This he gave to Paul Aram, who, taking out the letter, began a careful examination of the whole thing. It was a large square envelope and ordinary sized paper, both white and plain. There was not even an ornamental stamp on the adhesive part of the envelope, as so many have.

“Let us look at the manufactory mark on the paper,” Aram said, holding the two halves up to the lamp.

“And what guide would that be ?” asked Annas Holt, leaning over him. “The same manufactory sends out tens of thousands marked alike. You or I might have its ditto.”

“Undoubtedly.” A long pause—then, “Stop ! what’s this ?” starting violently. “Good God ! why I know—” he broke off suddenly, forced calmness upon himself, and, dropping his hands

on the table, with a torn half of the letter grasped tightly in each, he laughed—a harsh, unnatural laugh. But Annas Holt saw that a change had come over him, that his lips were white and tightly pressed together, and his forehead knit into many wrinkles.

“What do you know?” the artist asked, quickly, trying to take the paper from him, but failing.

“Nothing,” Paul Aram answered, tersely, as if angry at the question; “nothing—a mistake.” Then, making a great effort to speak naturally, “For a moment I *did* fancy I had some clue. Yes—but I had not thought; I judged on an altogether false premise. However, it may lead to something. Let me keep this, will you?” putting the letter back in its envelope.

“Why—if you know nothing?”

“It’s just possible I may help you to trace the writer,” he said, with elaborate carelessness, but he betrayed a too great anxiety to become possessed of the letter. Annas Holt, with his old habit of thought-interpreting, said, looking straight into his eyes,

“I would prefer to have it in my own keeping, thank you. You are welcome to see it whenever occasion requires. *You know the writer.*”

“What would you imply? I tell you I know nothing.”

“You suspect, and your suspicions affect you strangely. Look at your hands—why are they wrenching that paper as if it were the

throat of an enemy?" A pause—then more gently, "Why not tell me, Aram? We can work together."

"Have I not said there is nothing to tell?"

"I cannot press you, of course—your pardon for my doubts. The letter, please," Annas Holt said with proud dignity, holding out his hand. Paul Aram, not seeing it, dashed the paper down upon the table, and rose with a sudden and impetuous movement from his chair.

"I'm going to take a walk," he said, leaving the room abruptly, whilst Annas Holt looked after him wondering.

"Is it possible he wrote it himself?" was the first thought which passed through the artist's brain. Then, "No; his surprise was too genuine; he was thrown off his guard for a moment, *and lost*. He knows the writer—he would protect him. But since I have seen the first step taken before my eyes, it will not be difficult for me to take another. I have only to find out who are his acquaintance—and mine. Few enough, I should think, to give little trouble in the sorting." Annas Holt gathered up the paper to discover for himself, if possible, any peculiarity in the trade mark, which was evidently what had surprised Paul Aram.

Annas Holt held the paper up to the light, as the other had done, fitting the pieces together. There was nothing curious about the trade mark. He could make out the name "*Valietta*," just

as on another letter he examined there was "Dobson & Co.," on another "J. Smith," and again on others single letters and forms; a stag's head, a panther, a dog, and a variety of such stamps, which are only noticeable when held up to the light. Trade marks all of them. "Valietta," he said, "the name of the manufacturer, or of the manufactory, or of the place where it was manufactured, no doubt, and there must be millions like it in circulation. Something else must have excited Aram's attention." But Annas Holt could discover nothing. So, in despair, he replaced the letter in his desk, and being alone, he tried to amuse himself by reading a criticism of Ruskin's upon the last Royal Academy exhibition. Not that Annas Holt believed Ruskin a just or a good critic. He was too prejudiced, and a too great respecter of persons. "But the work of a clever man is always worth notice," Annas Holt said, "even if not exactly fitting in with one's own line of thought." And he was glad to be quiet after the unusual exertion of entertaining strangers at his table. Only he wished that Mrs. Grant would come in and talk sense with him, instead of fashionable nonsense with Captain Challice out there in the moonlight. "But what mattered it after all?" he argued; "a few more years of active pain, or a few more years of empty painlessness, and all will be over for me. What signifies it if one more fellow-creature pass me by, believing me no worthier of notice than the least of my kind? What matter that others are

preferred before me? I have borne, and I can bear on to the end." Thus he mused, growing morbid again in his solitude, hearing their voices outside, laughing together in merry jest, and their young footsteps treading up and down, up and down, in quick measured time. He could not go and join them—he was too tired. Already his limbs ached with the day's exertions, already his eyes were closing in very weariness; nobody wanted him—he could go to bed. They were Lisa's friends; let her entertain them till midnight if it pleased her. His strength was all spent for that day—he must rest or die.

When Paul Aram left the room, he walked straight across the garden to the arbour at the end, where the trees walled him in behind and the long gravel path stretched in front of him. His face was even paler than usual in the moonlight, and his hands clenched as if he were about to deal a blow at someone. Once an audible curse had escaped him, but he was silent now, for some mortal agony possessed him. Only one desperate hope was his—he might be mistaken—there might be some error somewhere. Nothing was proven—but then nothing might ever be proven. He might never know more about it than he did at this moment. That would be more horrible than the other—a torturing suspicion which he should never have a right to speak, knowing nothing—absolutely nothing. So he sat there alone, struggling to cast this suspicion away from him

—to see this thing in some other light which would not be to him all darkness.

As he sat bowed down, Constance and Captain Challice came out upon the path walking together arm in arm. Paul Aram heard his low tones (he had a very musical voice) and her laugh. She was in one of her gay moods this evening, like a girl of eighteen enjoying her first flirtation. Paul Aram, looking at them, only said within himself, "Another slave; poor fool! It is well hearts are out of fashion or his might suffer." Turning at the end of the path and coming towards the harbour, Constance saw him sitting there, for the moon was shining straight into it. At once she knew that he was suffering. His very attitude told the story. She could not endure to see him thus with stern contracted features, and hands tightly clenched. It grieved her to know him torturing himself in silence, as he often would. She could not pass him by unheeded; so, turning to Captain Challice, she said, "Do you mind dropping me here and going in alone? I want to speak to Mr. Aram; he is in the harbour, I see. There is something I forgot to tell him. You don't mind?"

"Yes, I do mind very considerably; but what's the good of it? 'Needs must when the devil drives,' you know. That's consoling when one *wants* to go his way, isn't it? but unpleasant if one objects. How say you?"

"Oh! I'm the devil am I? Thanks."

"Why, what have I been telling you all the evening? Surely you have learnt my opinion of you! or shall I repeat it?"

"Thank you, no—it's such a stupid old story. A beautiful devil, a broken heart, a bottle of brandy—and—and another devil," she answered mockingly.

"Did I suggest that my heart was broken, now, or likely to break?"

"In justice be it said, you did not."

"Because, you see, I always let that delicate organ go its own way, and it generally manages to accomplish its desires. So there's no breaking required. Now what can you answer?" earnestly.

"Olive is quite right; you are very *firm*, not to say obstinate. But be sober for a moment, do. Go in and talk to Annas Holt. There is really a great deal to be got out of him, if one can only work through his melancholy. Tell him I shall join you both in five minutes."

"Don't be longer, lest I die," he said, doing the theatrical and gazing skywards, doubtless quite aware how handsome his straight figure looked standing out against the moonlight, and to what advantage his regular white teeth showed glistening from under his brown moustache. He was essentially good-looking, without being in a degree handsome. Just such a man as women delight to look upon—and flirt with. Then having gone

through this little pantomime, he obeyed Constance, turning towards the house, while she joined Paul Aram in the arbour.

His face was now hidden in his hands, and he either did not or would not see her come up to him. She sat down opposite. Had it been Captain Challice or Annas Holt, or any other man of her acquaintance, she would have come near to him, seeing him troubled, and touched him to rouse him to a sense of her presence and of her sympathy. But never with Paul Aram. If he could believe her sympathetic, it must be by intuition only—she could not soften to him. Her manner was always cold and formal, sometimes repellent, in talking to him. Yet she had deep pity for his suffering.

“Why did you come out here, Paul?” she asked, just a shade more softly than usual. “I wanted you to stay with Annas Holt. He would interest you greatly if you gave yourself the trouble to search beneath the surface.”

“Yes,” doubtfully, while he just looked up to answer her question; then resumed his old attitude. He often sat thus thinking, and it did not seem strange to her that he should take so little heed of her presence; only, knowing his thoughts were sad, she wished to rouse him if possible.

“Will you walk?” she said. “It’s so much pleasanter out in the moonlight than here.”

“If you like,” he answered in the same abstracted tone, rising

and leaving the harbour with her. They strolled side by side up the path, but she did not offer to put her arm in his, as she had done with Captain Challice.

There was only this one path upon which people could walk if the grass were damp; the rest of the garden was all turf, which Lisa herself kept carefully mown, using the Ursa Major's machine as unblushingly as if it were her own property. To-night the grass sparkled dewy in the moonlight, so the gravel path was a more pleasant place to walk upon, and they paced up and down, up and down, for several turns without speaking. At last she said, by way of an observation, "How beautifully bright Mars is to-night! By the bye, have you seen the new satellites?"

"No."

Silence again, which she did not try to break, seeing that he was disinclined for conversation. Perhaps he would tell her presently what was troubling him. He generally gave his cares into her keeping, and his hopes and his transgressions, for he knew he could trust her implicitly. After a time he asked her abruptly, stopping in his walk and turning to face her,

"What did you do with the remainder of that stamped paper, Constance?"

"What paper?" she asked stupidly, for in the silence her thoughts had strayed far afield.

"What you showed me once—*his* paper."

“Paul,” very severely, “I thought that subject was forbidden between us for ever. Are you, who made the compact, going to be the first to break it?”

“You break no vows by answering my question. What did you do with it?”

“Really, how can I tell? If I did not use it all, no doubt I burnt it, or lost it, or left it behind me. Why, I have travelled half over the world since that day. Did you expect me to treasure carefully every remembrance of that time, so fraught with *pleasant* associations—even to preserving the letter paper?” she asked satirically, feeling annoyed that he should be treading so near forbidden ground. Let him once put his foot fairly upon it and she knew that the seas must lie between her and him for ever more. It was only silence which made friendship possible between them.

“Have you any of it by you now?” he asked, pursuing his subject heedless of her evident pain at listening—or possibly he misinterpreted it.

“Of course I have not—is it likely?” she answered hurriedly, and then went on, “But, Paul, I must not and *will* not continue this subject. What it can have to do with anything in our present life I cannot imagine; and if you are struggling to solve any of those past mysteries—give it up—no good can come of it, to you or to me.”

No, it could not; he knew that quite well now. He had held some faint hope of discovering from her manner whether he should be justified in saying more to her. But no; the matter must rest where it was for the present. He must watch—for her sake. He must learn the truth, and then, if need be, protect her from others; shield her, plot, lie, suffer for her, but prove her stainless at any cost. There was still the doubt, and he strained nerve and sinew to grasp it firmly, so that it should not break away from his hold. It seemed so impossible *she* could stoop so low, unless—she had stooped lower still and allowed herself to *love* Lisa Holt's husband! But this he could not believe of her, as he might of any other woman, seeing her great interest in the man. *If* she loved, he knew of old that she would stake her life upon that love, but she had never sunk so low as this. She was no coward, to use a coward's weapons for her own advantage. He could not believe this of her—not yet at least—not ever—he swore then, looking up into her eyes, which were resting upon him in half entreaty, half reproof, for his questioning.

But she might be mad! He had heard of such manias—God grant that it were so if this thing should be true of her.—But it was not true—it should not be true to him, even with that cursed word “Valietta” burning into his brain. He said he would not doubt. “But we say so much, and we believe so little, even

of our own professions," he answered himself, scoffing at his own sophistry.

"Suppose we go in now?" Constance said to him, having waited patiently for some explanation of his strange question. He offered none, and she grew tired of the silent grind up and down, down and up.

"I am going home," he answered, taking out his watch to see the time if possible by the light of the moon.

"So am I presently—but we must say good-night to Annas Holt. He will be hurt if we leave him the moment we go into the house."

"How careful she is about his feelings!" was the thought which crossed Paul Aram's brain, driven there by the bloodhounds of his own misery. But it only made him curse himself for his baseness, and he answered her with unusual softness,

"I am obliged to get back to London to-night. Make my excuses, will you? I have only just time to catch the last train."

"But you told Violet you were going to sleep at Hilton Abbey! She will be so disappointed if she does not find you at breakfast to-morrow morning."

"Why should I stay? We worked through all our business this afternoon. Violet must learn that a man's word is not always his bond," bitterly, "and that even Uncle Paul is not to be too implicitly trusted."

"Never, while I am her guardian, Paul, *you know that*. Why pain me needlessly?"

"Constance, forgive me," he implored, holding out his hand. "Sometimes I think I am mad; bear with me, oh! my—" but he stopped suddenly, meeting her eyes and interpreting their expression. Then he wrung, even to pain, the hand she held out to him in formal adieu, and strode across the lawn towards the entrance gate, then out and away up the road.

He was hating himself for all he had suspected. Lashing himself with many stripes, hoping thereby to persuade himself that he had been in fault, that he had rushed at conclusions, that he alone was guilty; this or anything else but what his reason showed him. But he had one precious piece of balm to lay over his wounds—he had not let her know what he suspected, as in the first moment of his agony he had intended doing. Once he had determined to ask her—thank God he had not done so. It were to drive her to lie to him if she were guilty, and if innocent, he—the thought was hideous to him—*he might not have believed her*, with the sound of that name perpetually jangling in his brain. Anyhow, she would have turned away from him, even as the rest of the prosperous world had done. Yes, it was well that he had not accused too hastily. He must discover more first, and then turn to her for an explanation, if so be that she could give one. "Of course she will be able to clear it all

up," he told himself over and over again, as if the mere saying of it would prove her guiltless. But alas! he could not cast out devils—for surely no one except Constance possessed paper with that word invisibly stamped across it—*that word which had once spoken to him in tones of feverish madness*. The paper looked like any ordinary paper—it must have been mixed with some other, and so written upon in ignorance of its kind. And indeed to no other person except himself would it bear any interpretation even when seen. Undoubtedly the paper and its identity were facts, but there remained the just possible doubt that some other person had gotten possession of the paper, and written upon it to Annas Holt. But who—who in all Bay-Hilton came to her house, had access to her desk, and knew her connection with the Holts? *No one*. And this he could not doubt. No one of all her present acquaintance, except himself, could have any means of becoming linked with a past of which that paper was an emblem.

And thus Paul Aram tortured himself during the long midnight journey to London, his thoughts taking a hundred different directions in the same moment of time. He believed—and he disbelieved—he trusted—and he doubted—and everything wore different aspects at each different rise and fall of those waters which, sweeping over the one particle of faith left to him, were struggling to wash it away out of his grasp. But he clung

to it for dear life still, since, if this were gone, what remained to him? Nothing—nothing in the widest, dreariest sense of emptiness and void.

Constance Grant, wondering at Paul Aram's sudden change of plans, went into the house, purposing to amuse Annas Holt for the short remainder of the evening—but he was gone, and only Lisa occupied the room with Tom Major. These two, having successfully circumvented an army of wasps and reduced them to pitiless ruin, were now amusing themselves by disputing as to the rendering of a certain passage in the "Iliad," which Lisa averred had been wrongly translated by Lord Derby, while Tom Major, knowing nothing of Greek, persisted in refusing to admit any possibility of error in what "made perfectly good sense anyhow."

Lisa then tried to impress upon him that good sense was not the only desideratum in the rendering of certain ideas in a foreign language. That "If the idea created by a translator is other than the idea intended by the author, the translator commits an unpardonable error. *Q. E. D.*" and so forth. But the talented Tom Major only replied, "What a dence of a row about nothing!" and subsided without a struggle; to Lisa's infinite disgust, for she dearly loved an argument which would set her classical knowledge above that of a "public school boy," a term of derision which she applied to the Ursa Major when ignorance and Eton were proclaimed by him in the same proud breath.

It was later than Constance had fancied when she re-entered the house, so she proposed to Captain Challice that he should walk home with her. She had not ordered her carriage, feeling that for such a meeting as this which she had volunteered to join at The Ford Cottage, it would look less like setting herself above her company if she walked as the others would do. It was altogether a curious and decidedly Bohemian gathering of self-invited men, with only Lisa, whom they looked upon as quite one of themselves, to support Constance's presence among so many of the other sex.

It seemed to her like going back to an old life that she had almost forgotten, and the memories which this evening's entertainment awoke within her were of a motley and curious kind, so that she laughed several times to herself, wondering if any of them guessed how it came about that she could so gracefully adapt herself to this very unceremonious mode of coming and going, with the heartiness of inborn vagabondism.





CHAPTER XIV.

HAD Annas Holt been the only recipient of anonymous letters in Ray-Hilton, it is likely that nothing of all this story would have come to pass. The artist, visiting nowhere and receiving no one, except *now* occasionally Tom Major or Captain Challice in his house, would have shut up the whole matter in the proverbial nutshell, where it would have remained for ever probably, to torture himself alone, notwithstanding his desire to drag it forth into the light of day. But the letter-writer, being (evidently) a person of enlarged mind, was not content to confine his noble deeds to the appreciation of any one circle of admirers. Having begun humbly at The Ford Cottage, the unknown hero proceeded cautiously till at last he attacked the higher level of Ray-Hilton society.

Already had Annas Holt received a second letter, more open in its accusation than the former, but to the same effect. He was to watch lest his house be brought to open shame. This

letter pointed *directly* at his wife and her friends. It was in the same neat text hand, but on paper just a size smaller than the first, and the trade mark was not the word "Valietta," but only the letters "*N. O. C.*" in italics. These said as much to Annas Holt as the first, and neither anything. He laid it aside with the other, and carefully locked it away for future use, chafing inwardly at his own impotency.

It was November now, and the days were growing cold, but bright fires blazed in all the rooms at Castlerock, and bright voices made them cheerful, so that it mattered not a jot to one of the Challice family whether the skies were cloudy or fair—the temperature high or low. Their lives were filled to the full, each with its own occupations, which were in no wise affected by weather. Neither snow nor wind nor rain kept Dorothy from visiting her poor and holding her classes for working, cooking, and washing amongst them. Scorching suns or withering frosts did not make Olive afraid to ride, drive, skate, or practise lawn tennis, while Guy was at home to "keep her up to it," Guy or any other equally agreeable companion. And in summer and winter alike Lady Challice lived to make her children's home happy, and to encourage Bertrand in his literary work, he being, above all others, her beloved, though only her step-son. But then he loved her so fondly in return! He was so tender over her, so thoughtful of her every whim—so romantically one with his father's second

wife, who had been to him as a mother—kinder than a mother, because, not being her own child, she had felt only the more bound by duty to take a special interest in him, the more anxious to force out of his mind that vulgar prejudice about step-mothers which servants and friends are so careful to inculcate. It is so delightful to feel that one is helping an ignorant child to see things in a proper light. “She is a very good woman, your step-mother,” we say; “a very estimable person, my dear; most praiseworthy in her endeavours to do her duty by you, and you must love her very much indeed—only don’t forget your own dear mother—no one can ever replace your own tender loving mother, child.” Lady Challice had often fancied she could hear them saying this to the little Bertrand, and she, with her native obstinacy, answered them silently, “Talk on, good people, talk on—but the boy *shall* love me with a love as true as it is in his nature to give.” She had succeeded—she had put these friends to shame, and her reward was a thousandfold.

They were all assembled in the drawing room this November afternoon, when the twilight was closing in. Dorothy could no longer see to knit nor Olive to finish “Daniel Deronda.” Lessons were over for that day, and Ella played at “beggar my neighbour” with her comrade “Pumps” in the big window seat, each being unwilling to yield till the darkness should cover them entirely. Captain Challice was teasing Olive, telling her she was

growing old (which is no insult at two and twenty) and that he should take to riding with Ella soon. All this he said because Olive had gone out with him that afternoon to call on the Clifford Cliffords in a dress he called "dowdy," but which she persisted in saying she "affectioned greatly," it being something quite new which she had just received from London, something wherewith she hoped to arouse the envy and jealousy of Miss Clifford Clifford. It was not therefore to be set aside for all Guy's abuse, nor even when he said it made her look "a downright old maid." Accordingly Captain Challice, with soldierly persistency, was "at her again" this evening, knowing nothing better with which to amuse himself in the twilight.

Bertrand had just finished reading his last poem to Lady Challice and Dorothy; leaving the others to listen or not as it pleased them. By and bye there was a silence amongst them all, which allowed Olive to address her mother.

"Oh! mother, I've just remembered to tell you. I asked Mrs. Grant to come to lunch to-morrow. She and I intend riding to Leightown on 'urgent private affairs,' as Her Majesty's servants plead," winking wickedly at her brother. "Have cold pheasants for lunch, will you? Constance loves cold pheasants."

"Constance! How you rush into friendships, Olive!" Dorothy said gently. "You have known Mrs. Grant six months,

and you call her Constance, besides gushing about her to every other girl you '*adore*.' "

"Well, and she *is* the very most delightful companion anyone could possibly have; now isn't she, Guy?"

"Oh! of course—all your friends are."

"Coward, coward, you know you are half in love with her yourself, but you won't confess it for fear of being chaffed. How very brave you soldiers are!"

"I like her very much," Dorothy said soberly, "and I never saw any woman whose beauty I can *feel* as I do hers; it has a peculiar fascination for me, but still I am not disposed to rush at her and embrace her every half hour, as you are always wanting to do."

"Only, unfortunately for your story, she wouldn't let me. You know she hates 'gush,' as she calls it, and therefore I don't quite see what delight I am supposed to take in 'gushing' without response, Dorothy my wise sister. You are jealous that Constance likes me best; that's the truth of it."

"Nothing like a little self-complacency, said Guy. "I should say now she likes Dorothy best, if you asked me."

"Admires her character most you mean. Of course she does, so does everyone. But as I don't go in for the moral flattering unction business, I'd rather be liked than respected, and Constance certainly *likes* me best—doesn't she, Bertrand?"

He roused himself from a reverie, and, yawning, said in a lazy drawl, "Don't know what you were talking about—was asleep."

"Who does Constance Grant like best—Dorothy or me?"

"Don't value either of you at half a brass farthing—makes a fool of Guy—tolerates mother—ignores you girls—and—er—er—admires me at a distance as some good-looking poodle whom she expects to run after her, wagging its tail the moment she cares to call it—Poor poodle! deluded creature! But she's charming, and poodle forgives her."

In this serio-comic, lazy way Bertrand Challice always gave forth his opinion, raising and lowering his dark blue eyes the while in a manner that sent all the girls of Ray-Hilton crazy about him. But he expected to be admired, and took it all as a matter of course, and gave nothing in return. "Guy goes in for doing the agreeable," he used to say; "don't want to cut him out, you know; besides—widows are one too many for me!!!"

"Well, now," interrupted Ella from the window, "I'm quite positive that Mrs. Grant loves me best of you all. I'm the only one she *kisses*; there!" triumphantly.

"You're only a child," Pumps retorted, cross at having been "beggared."

"She hates boys," was the retort.

"Never mind, Pumps; your turn's coming," said Bertrand, patting his little brother patronisingly.

"Yes," replied that young gentleman suavely; "I know all about it. Heard her tell Guy she liked men ever so much better than women—and she's quite right, too. Come along, Ella, let's go to the play-room."

"Shan't."

"I'm going to make toffee."

"Oh! are you? Jolly!" And the insult of a moment ago was forgotten. Becoming gracious, she put her arm round Pumps' neck, and walked off with him.

"Now, if you have all done talking nonsense," said Lady Chalice, "perhaps I may say a word for your own benefit—We propose asking Mrs. Grant to spend Christmas with us—Having no family ties, she may be glad to join in our merry-makings."

"No family!" exclaimed Guy; "that child Violet is as bad as any other dozen. Go on, Mater."

But Bertrand interposed.

"Little Violet!—man of no taste you are—Violet!—golden haired, angel-eyed Violet!—only girl I ever really loved! Made three poems about her last week—one in Iambic Trimeter—another in Trochaic Pentameter—last in Dactylic Dimeter—beastly difficult that; sat up all night to finish it—Honour bright," he added, hearing Olive laugh derisively. "Of course, my Violet will come, too; otherwise I shall simply stay in bed all Christmas."

"Now do you suppose," Olive answered him, "that Mrs. Grant would come without Violet? No; the weakest thing about Constance is her ridiculous slavery to that child. Not her own either, or one might pardon it. Why, only think, Guy, last week she was going to the fancy ball at Highfields (by the bye, the FitzGeralds are friends of hers)—well, she had got up a most magnificent dress for the occasion, some classical thing or other, not that I remember what she called it, only it was lovely—she showed it to *me*," triumphantly to Dorothy. "Well, the point of the story is, that just as she was getting into the carriage to go off, that stupid donkey of a maid Dennis must needs come tearing down. 'Miss Violet had woke up in a fright—Miss Violet said she was ill—Miss Violet wouldn't let her (Dennis) nurse her'—and lots more bosh—'would Madame go upstairs again for a minute?' So 'Madame' went up, and 'Madame' stayed up, and 'Madame' never went to the ball at all, because the child was screaming with ear-ache, or some such nonsense. Constance must bathe it!—Constance must sing to her!—and, like a fool, Constance takes off her dress and obeys. Would I? Oh! no, thank you. 'Not for Joe.'"

"Perhaps you have never had a bad ear-ache, Olive?" Lady Challice asked reprovingly.

"No, thank goodness."

"Ah! well—when you have one, just inform us, and we'll all

go away leaving you to spend the evening with Pauline. You may feel some sympathy with little Violet then. But let us turn back to our original question. Is it agreed on all hands that Mrs. Grant shall be asked to join our Christmas party?"

"Carried—*nem. con.*," was answered by all at once.

"The Paternal?" suggested Bertrand grimly.

"Oh! I will answer for him," said Lady Challice. And here "mother's thumbs" were crossed in that way which the young folk knew meant determination and business.

At this moment the servant brought in afternoon tea and the so-called mid-day letters. The gas was then lighted, and the various occupations resumed.

There were letters for Captain Challice, Olive, and Lady Challice. Two of hers were looked over casually, and put into her pocket. The third was read, and re-read, turned over, the envelope examined, shaken, laid down, and, "Well, this is strange!" spoken aloud for general sympathy.

"Who's married, eh?" drawled Bertrand, pulling his moustache; and Lady Challice was just proceeding to read the letter aloud, when she suddenly stopped. "No," she said; "it's not quite the thing for the girls to hear. Doubtless you boys will enjoy it immensely. It does *not* concern you, Bertrand, so you may have first read—people always enjoy what doesn't concern them." This she said with that young, hearty laugh which made her children

feel her so entirely one of themselves. Bertrand took the letter and having read it, turned it over as she had done, remarking with perfect serenity, "Anonymous, by Jingo!" Then he passed it across to his brother.

Dorothy, delicate of feeling always, seeing that something was only awaiting their exit from the room to be discussed or disclosed, said to Olive, "If you like to come upstairs and give me that lace, I'll sew it on for you; we have just time before dinner."

Now, Olive, being gifted with a fair amount of curiosity, would fain have stayed to pick up those crumbs of information which might be let fall from the table of her elders, but, being also wise in her generation, she knew that when mother once said they were not to hear anything, or read, or see anything, she strictly adhered to her point—for there were no vague threatenings at Castlerock. Too much liberty they *were*, perhaps, allowed—too much, at least, for general approbation; but some barriers had been set up, and no one dared to cross them. "Mother" made few laws, but what she did make were absolute. Accordingly, Olive knowing that nothing would be gained by remaining in the room, followed Dorothy upstairs.

"Read it aloud, Guy," Lady Challice said when the girls had gone; "perhaps I shall understand it better—if, indeed, such rubbish be worth understanding at all."

And Captain Challice, obeying her, read :

It is easier to prevent an evil than to correct it once committed. Army men have more love of pleasure than they have judgment in pursuing it ; their families suffer. Serious evils arise from the linking of a young man's name with that of a married woman, more especially if that woman be a person of doubtful reputability. If you do not wish a member of your family to be mocked and ridiculed side by side with a fox-hunting squire of the neighbourhood, give timely warning, before the acquaintance with a certain young woman be publicly known.

"Damned fool !" said Guy his naturally hot temper roused by the insult, even to the forgetting of his mother's presence.

"Don't," said Bertrand laconically ; "don't—not worth a curse—really."

"Tell me, Guy, has it any meaning ?" Lady Challice asked in the straightforward way she always spoke to her children, expecting an equally straightforward answer.

"There's no smoke without fire, mother mine, of course. Some fool objects to my visiting at The Ford Cottage, and deems himself morally bound to remonstrate against my joining Tom Major on his rides."

"With Mrs. Holt ?"

"Sometimes, yes, but oftener without her—You seem to think she lives by Major's side. Now, let me tell you that's a mistake, mother—a regular Ray-Hilton conclusion. Occasionally, I grant, she is to be met trotting along by his side on the roads, oftener perhaps heading him across the field, now and again, too, whip-

ping the river along with him. But"—warming—"I swear she's oftener to be found at home, cooking her husband's dinner or grinding over her son's lessons. She's the best little woman out, and if I can defend her by being called to account on her behalf, let them go ahead. I'm ready. But no, they're a cursed set of cowards."

"Guy!"

"Beg pardon, mother; I'm beastly cross; can't help it. I repeat——"

"Listen to me, my boy." This was a way she had of addressing her sons which they loved to hear; there was something quieting in her soft, motherly tone of remonstrance. "A *man* can never defend a woman in the way you propose; it were but to make matters worse for her. If you would be her friend, *keep clear of her* in doubtful places."

"Is her husband's house a doubtful place?"

"Yes, since neither your mother nor your sisters visit there."

"That would apply to all my friends whom you don't happen to know."

"The Holts are neighbours, you see. But don't mistake me. I am only speaking for her good name here in Ray-Hilton. It is not the *man* who suffers if two people get talked about, remember."

"Mrs. Grant is generally there when I am."

"So much the better for Mrs. Holt, It may be well for her to have a *woman* friend, and if Mrs. Grant chooses to fight for her, I have no doubt some good may come of it—in time. But you will only undo what she does, believe me, Guy."

"Well, look here! you are all prejudiced parties, starting on the premise that Mrs. Holt is not what she should be. That I know to be false—it is a vile injustice!—a libel! a——"

"Anything more," asked Bertrand superciliously, gaping and stretching out both his arms.

"Idiot!" replied Guy, flinging the newspaper at his brother, whose remark had nevertheless brought him to his senses, and he continued more coolly, "What I was going to say is this, mother,—show that letter to Mrs. Grant, who is an unprejudiced party."

"Prejudiced in the opposite direction, you mean."

"And"—unheeding—"and if she counsels me to draw in my horns with Mrs. Holt, I'll do it."

"Already some one before your mother, Guy," a little sadly; then recovering, "Well, it is the nature of young minds to be governed by young minds. So be it; Mrs. Grant shall give you her opinion. She is, as you say, unprejudiced, and, what is more, a woman who knows the world. What say you, Bertrand?"

"That Guy's a gone coon!—lost soul!—miserable being!"

"What for?" Guy questioned angrily.

"People in love are like fish out of water—flopping about

helplessly, you know—perishing miserably. I'll write an epitaph on you—Choose your metre—Alas! such is life!" with a long-drawn sigh.

"I say, Bert, this is 'crops and kettles.' How many times were you *non compos* last year? Let me see, there were Fanny, and Lucy, and Marguerite, whom I saw. How many more remain behind the scenes? It is not——"

"Possibly—But then, you know, it's all on their side—amuses them, and don't hurt me! Improves the style of one's poetry and suggests padding for Vol II. of one's novel!"

"What stuff you men are talking! I shall send the girls down to stop you," said Lady Challice, and left the room.

Outside she stopped to wipe a tear from her eyes—Constance Grant was not the wife she would have chosen for her son, and yet she saw that it was almost inevitable. Like a wise woman, she would not set up her back and bristle her fur just to show her own personal objection to the match, knowing too well that she had not the power to prevent, if Guy should have set his heart upon it.

In after years (should this marriage come to pass) her son and his wife must not have it in their power to reproach her with want of sympathy for their love, or with obstructing their chosen road to happiness, because it was not one which she had pointed out to them. Lady Challice had known too many

parents err in this way—watched them making for themselves a bed of stinging nettles on which they must some day lie them down. She had seen them offer useless and absolutely fruitless opposition to some marriage a child had determined to make, for no better reason than that this match was to the parent herself objectionable or unfitting.

If by their opposition they could be sure of *preventing* what they judged to be an evil, then, indeed, would Lady Challice have given small blame to them for opposing till death should end their struggle. But often—so very often—it is known full well that sooner or later the thing *will be*; and yet they go on opposing by looks, and signs, and silent insults, which they heap upon the supposed offender—as yet defenceless. By and bye, when the years have passed and the parent has seen her child bound for life to that objectionable love, when all their interests are one with each other, and should be one with hers, *but are not*—then the poor old mother, standing out in the cold, homeless and loveless, wonders why her child who loved her once cares nothing for her now; why her new child, whom she would fain take into her heart at last, refuses so sternly to come there. She has forgotten her own obstructiveness in the days gone by; forgotten the insults, and the cold, heartless taunting which she used as weapons against one she did not wish her child to love because *she did not approve*—yes, *she* forgets and wonders why those

children stand so far off now. But the others remember, and the old sores rankle yet, and there is no possibility of rushing into arms which once repelled

“As you make your bed, so shall you lie upon it,” Lady Challice often said, “trite though the proverb be and hackneyed.” It is so true. Would we be loved, we must win love—aye, from the very beginning. Why oppose our children where opposition cannot become authority? Have we the power to say to men and woman, “You shall not do this thing; I forbid you,” as we commanded in the days of their childhood’s weakness?

Lady Challice had already pointed out to her son, in all loving kindness, the reasons she saw against his taking Constance Grant for a wife. He had laughed at her, calling her “a delicious old prudence,” and saying, “But, mother mine, if I *am* in love, I am *not* going to make a fool of myself. Mrs. Grant wouldn’t take me even at my own valuation, so I shall not ask her—not yet—not ever, unless I see some chance for myself. Besides, a flirtation with a clever and pretty woman is too amusing for me to risk bringing it to an untimely end by being *refused*. All the same, if you set your face against her coming here, I shall go and propose at once.”

“I thought she would refuse you?” his mother had answered, in good-natured repartee.

“Oh! trust me for getting round her, if I put my shoulder to

the wheel. But as I object to hard work of any kind, I shall let the wheel turn at its own pace, or stand still, unless you drive me to exert myself."

And here the matter had rested. That conversation took place a month ago, and still Constance Grant was to spend her Christmas at Castlerock. Guy had said he wished it to be so, and Guy being a visitor at home was allowed to rule the household during his short sojourns in Bay-Hilton. With the New Year he must return to duty and to his regiment, let Eros raise his arm or Aphrodite lift her veil—or all heavenly hosts combine to chain him at Castlerock. The Parcæ had willed that he should be a soldier, and there was no warring against the calls of duty, let his desires in another direction be what they would.

END OF VOLUME I.



